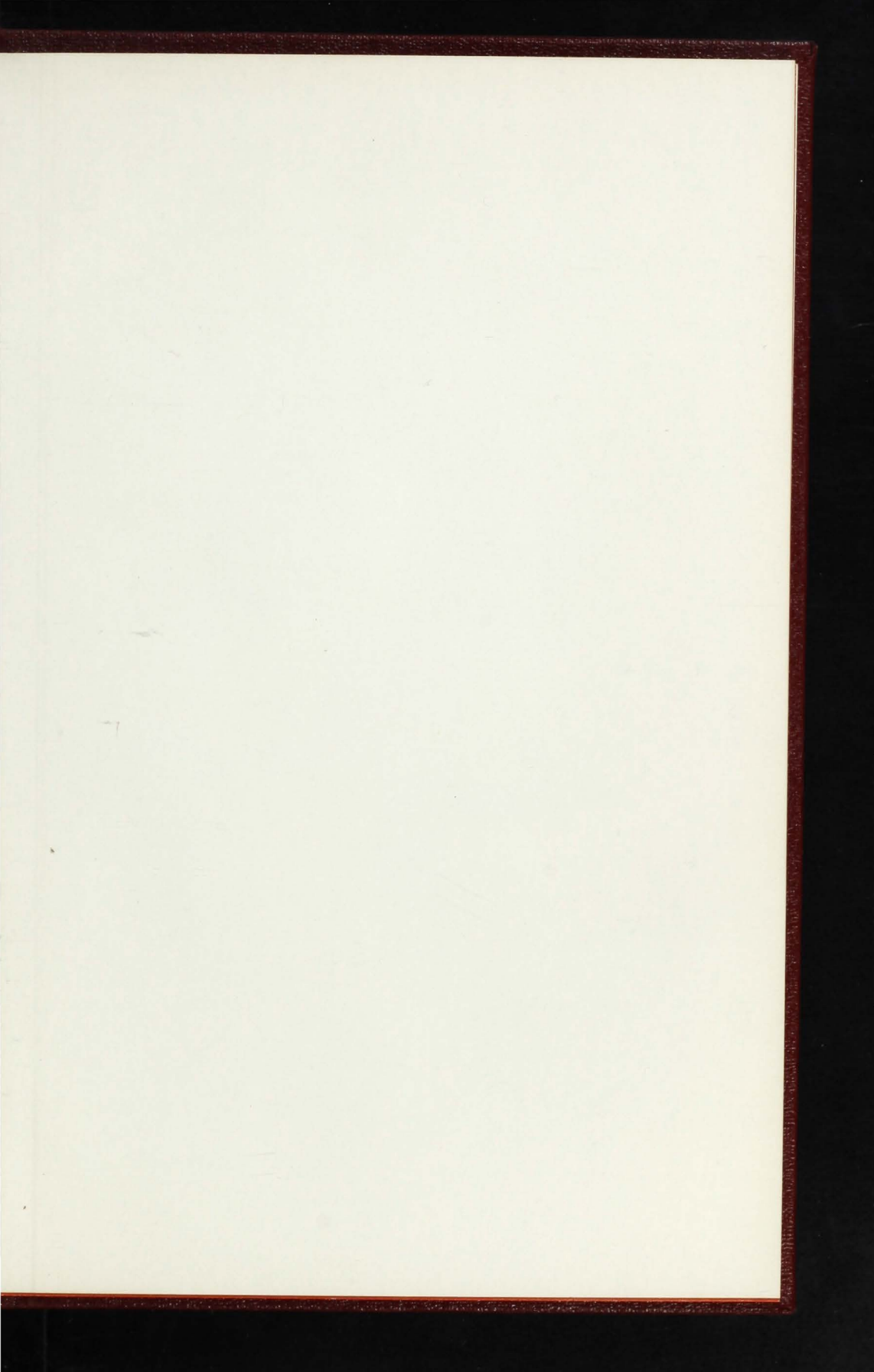


BRITISH LIBRARY
OF POLITICAL AND
ECONOMIC SCIENCE



LONDON SCHOOL OF
ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE
10, PORTUGAL STREET,
LONDON WC2A 2HD

Tel. 01-405 7686



REPORT
OF THE
COMMISSIONER

OF THE
LAND OFFICE

FOR THE YEAR
1892

ALBANY:
1893

CONSTITUTION

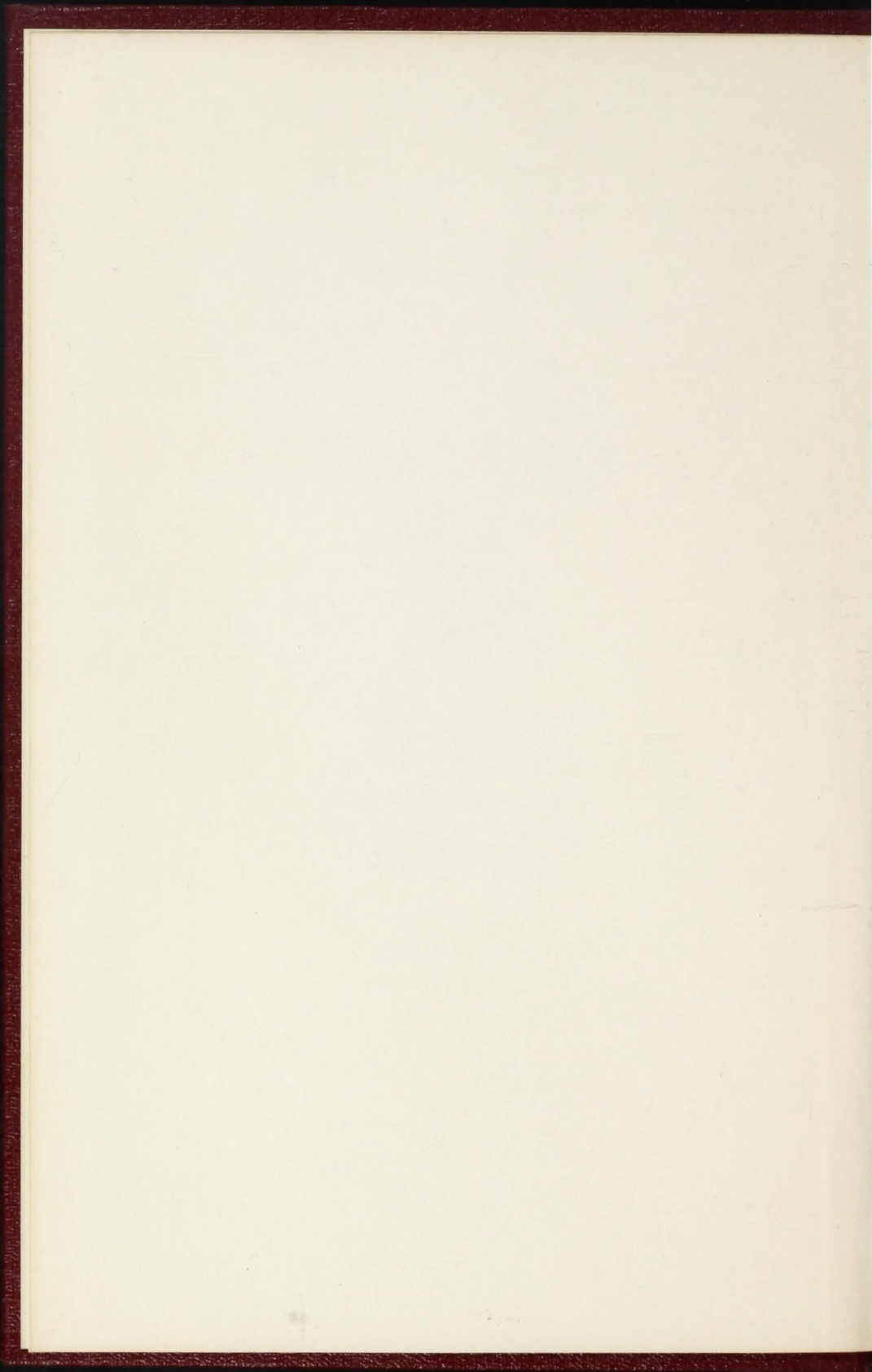
OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

1787

ARTICLE I

LEGISLATIVE





M33
JF
1075
.67
E31

electoral reform

Tom Ellis v Rosaleen Hughes &
Phillip Whitehead
fabian tract 483

£1.50

ARGUMENT



fabian tract 483

Electoral reform

chapter	1	Why electoral reform	1
	2	The case against proportional representation	15

The Authors

Tom Ellis has been MP for Wrexham since 1970. He was a member of the Labour Party (1943-81) before becoming a founder member of the SDP. A Works Chemist for ICI he became a coal miner when the mines were nationalised and later graduated in mining engineering with the help of NCB scholarship. He was a colliery manager from 1957-60.

Rosaleen Hughes is the Secretary of the Young Fabians. She read PPE at Oxford and is currently research assistant to Phillip Whitehead.

Phillip Whitehead is MP for Derby North and Labour's Front Bench Spokesman on Higher Education and on the Arts. He was Chairman of the Fabian Society in 1978-79, a member of the Annan Committee from 1974-77, and of the Select Committee on Procedure. He is a writer and television producer.

This pamphlet, like all the publications of the Fabian Society, represents not the collective view of the Society but only the views of the individuals who prepared it. The responsibility of the Society is limited to approving the publications it issues as worthy of consideration within the Labour movement.

Fabian Society, 11 Dartmouth Street, London SW1H 9BN.

September 1982
ISBN 7163 0483 X 1
ISSN 0307 7535

Fabian Society, 11 Dartmouth Street, London SW1H 9BN.

Cover design by Dick Leadbetter
Printed by Blackrose Press (TU)
Photoset by Range Left (TU)

1. Why Electoral Reform?

Tom Ellis

Democracy is today a freely used word; it is at the same time a difficult one. Mass-democracy presents even greater difficulties. Nevertheless the effectiveness of its mass-democratic institutions must be a paramount consideration for the citizens of a country whose most significant political development during the twentieth-century has been the erosion of its formerly hierarchic social and political structures.

Britain today has become a laterally structured society in which Jack is as good as his master. At long last the unique 300 year old continuum of the country's ruling class has been ruptured bringing to an end the seemingly effortless stability and success which had characterised it. In the meantime extraordinary problems have arisen impairing the effectiveness of Britain's political institutions.

Introduction

Problems of adaptation present themselves especially in respect of two essential characteristics of representative mass-democratic government: firstly that it depends on a sufficient degree of consensus which can be represented existing in society and secondly that its leaders should trust the people sufficiently. Neither characteristic, each of which complements and stimulates the other, is convincingly demonstrated in Britain today. The shortcomings are particularly grievous for Britain because of her unique tradition of unfettered parliamentary sovereignty – the 'very keystone' of the unwritten constitution – whereby parliament is free of the encumbrances of a written constitution, constitutional court, separation of powers, federal structures, delegated membership and almost, one might say, bicameral prudence. To justify this somewhat extraordinary constitutional arrangement society must at least feel that parliament truly represents it and can be trusted.

An additional problem is that British parliamentarians, conditioned slavishly to follow outmoded practices some of which today are aberrations, seem to be instinctively prejudiced against these two essential characteristics of mass-democracy and

to be determined to prevent their being established in any meaningful degree.

“For Britain to regain her self-assurance and poise therefore, it has become necessary for the British people, despite the waywardness of their political leaders, to insist on their proper democratic entitlement.”

For Britain to regain her self-assurance and poise therefore, it has become necessary for the British people, despite the waywardness of their political leaders, to insist on their proper democratic entitlement.

Two common myths, held against the weight of all the evidence, must be demolished initially if significant advances are to be made. The first is that the British parliamentary system of democratic government is the finest in the world.

Nowadays perhaps, in the face of its more obvious shortcomings, some people shamefacedly might concede let us say, that it is served by parliamentarians of less than the highest calibre but nostalgia for past glories still persuades them of the system's continuing superiority. The myth

MSS
JF
1075
.G7
E31

15/12/82

draws sustenance from many sources. An example is the melange of parliamentary flummery on which it feeds, the archaic ceremony and procedure, sentimental nostalgia about the Mother of Parliaments and the country's long history of stable parliamentary democracy, wishful thinking about our effortless constitutional supremacy – the easy flexibility of an unwritten constitution, that gentlemen's agreement denied to lesser mortals – and the commonplace snobbery evoked even today by the idea of gallant if hardly patrician amateurs muddling through successfully in the end.

Or again there is the more direct influence of luddite politicians determined to retain the system under which they were apprenticed to their craft and which has served them well. Many of them with their own tributes are only too anxious to humour a national proclivity in parliamentary matters dangerously predisposed towards self-congratulation.

The second common British myth is that electoral reform while no doubt desirable in itself and worthy of support is of marginal political significance; that it is merely a do-gooding, fuddy-duddy, middle-class thing, a Liberal whimsey concerned with arithmetic and best left to clever people in colleges to argue about. The established politicians, however, appreciate that electoral reform is political dynamite and oppose it implacably for that reason while at the same time nurturing the myth by pretending less vehemently to disparage electoral reform either as an irrelevance or as perverse, foreign obscurantism.

“A causal relationship can now be established between the shortcomings of Britain's parliamentary system and her chronic decline.”

It is important to demolish the first myth because a causal relationship can now be

established between the shortcomings of Britain's parliamentary system and her chronic decline. The importance of demolishing the second arises from the fact that introducing an appropriate electoral system incorporating a much stronger democratic bias is probably the single most effective practical step one can readily take which would initiate radical qualitative change for the better in the parliamentary system. The aim of this pamphlet is to justify both these claims. Before considering these political issues, however, it might not be inappropriate first to look briefly at some factual and quantitative aspects of the present British electoral system.

British Electoral Arithmetic and its Aberrations

The British electoral system, like universal suffrage and the franchise itself, was not established in antiquity and there are no historical grounds for regarding it as sacrosanct. Prior to the 1884 Reform Act the majority of constituencies were multi-member and even under the 1918 Representation of the People Act, 13 constituencies had two members of which all were not finally abolished until 1950. In addition, in the multi-member university seats (Oxford, Cambridge, combined English universities, Scottish universities) which also survived into the post-war era, candidates were elected under the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system of proportional representation.

Nor is there an international consensus for the British system thereby suggesting that it is overwhelmingly attractive. Out of some two dozen or so leading western democracies, only four – Canada, New Zealand the USA and South Africa – operate our simple majority system and some of these countries have other constitutional balances (separation of powers,

federal structure, constitutional courts, written constitutions, *etcetera*) which ameliorate the adverse consequences of British-type electoral arithmetic.

In Britain the system has in fact resulted in comparatively short-lived governments. Between 1964 and 1974, largely because of the waywardness of external events we had little of either strong or stable government. Four elections in ten years, providing an average of 30 months a government was even worse than the average of 35 months between July 1945 and October 1974. A more seriously debilitating result of the system however, is that since 1935 neither of the major parties has been able at an election to muster over 50 per cent of the votes cast let alone 50 per cent of the electorate, yet they have formed governments with large majorities in the House of Commons. Indeed on two occasions since the war a party which had received less electoral support than its main rival actually held a majority of seats and formed a government. One could well argue in a Fabian tract that the course of British history might have been very different if in 1951 for example, the Labour Party with its highest ever vote, a figure never since achieved, had won its proportionate share of parliamentary seats. In fact Labour with 48.8 per cent of the vote returned 295 MPs and the Conservative Party with 48.0 per cent returned 321 MPs to claim a substantial parliamentary majority.

“The concept of a ‘mandate to govern,’ much trumpeted by party leaders after successful elections, is clearly disingenuous and at best no more than a claim to exploit a perverse set of rules.”

The concept of a ‘mandate to govern’ much trumpeted by party leaders after successful elections, is clearly disingenuous and at best no more than a claim

to exploit a perverse set of rules. At worst, as will be seen, it has become under the British system a licence under which extravagant and simplistic appeals to the electorate reduce politics to a cynical game of goodies and baddies. The bias in the system is in fact profoundly anti-democratic. Neither major party is concerned with trusting the people or with the credibility of its policy. The aim is to cultivate a dichotomy of interest expressed by two parties based largely on sectional and class differences and them simply to wait for the swing of the pendulum when ‘our turn will come’. It is this heightened and frequently unreasoning partisanship on the part of the politicians and the stunted application of the concept of governing with the consent of the people which is at the root of the public cynicism surrounding politics and politicians in Britain.

The phenomenon of large numbers of wasted votes, votes which have played no part in choosing the final representation either because, in a particular constituency, they are given to a minority party or because they form part of an excessive majority of the dominant party, also helps in producing frustration and ultimately cynicism. The mood is reflected in the arithmetic by the large number of abstaining electors and by the declining proportion of votes received by the two major parties despite the ineffectiveness of the system in sustaining a three party House of Commons. The turn-out at the general election of 1950 for example was 84.0 per cent whereas in October 1974 and May 1979 the figures were 72.8 per cent and 76.0 per cent respectively. Even the 1950 figure compares unfavourably with the 90 per cent or more nowadays achieved in several continental countries (apart from those where voting is compulsory) using systems of proportional representation where a much greater proportion of the votes cast are used to effect. The most recent British administrations, the Labour government

of 1974 and the present Conservative government, were elected respectively by 27.8 per cent and 33.3 per cent of the electorate.

The combined Labour-Conservative share of the total vote (not electorate) in October 1974 was just 75 per cent. That compares with the period 1931-1970 when it averaged 91 per cent and never fell below 87 per cent. From a Labour point of view however, the most starkly chilling comparison is between its vote in 1951 and 1979. The electorate increased during the period by 5.7 millions from 34.6 millions to 40.1 millions while the Labour vote fell by 2.4 millions from 13,948,605 to 11,457,079.

Another important aberration of the British electoral system is the discrimination exercised against minority parties and their supporters, seen at its worst probably in the February 1974 general election when the Liberal Party was rewarded with 14 parliamentary seats for its 6,063,470 votes. Each of the two main parties at that election had less than twice as many votes as the Liberal Party but captured more than twenty times as many seats. Any political party which claims to support a democratic system of government based on parliamentary representation and at the same time refuses to remedy so gross an injustice cannot deplore criticism of its own lack of idealism and morality nor complain when the democracy itself begins to show symptoms of the cancer at its heart. Nor for that matter can a politician claim to be a socialist as some do including members of the Fabian Society, who cannot see that a socialism which does not struggle against abuses is depriving itself of its *raison d'être*.

The abuse of the franchise is bad of itself but even worse are the consequences of that abuse. Two in particular are worth drawing attention to. Firstly, a feature of British political life now seems to be that in large parts of the country a single party

holds a permanent monopoly of representation. For example, in the South East region of England from Kent to West Sussex, in the South from Berkshire to Dorset, and in the South West from Avon to Cornwall, the Conservative Party, which received about 54 per cent of the vote in 1979, holds 107 out of a total of 116 seats. There are 1.5 million Labour voters and 1.2 million Liberal voters in the whole region some of whom would have to travel 100 miles to contact their nearest Labour or Liberal MP. The phrase 'two nations' has acquired a new and dangerous territorial connotation which would never have entered Disraeli's mind.

Secondly, Lord Acton's dictum about power tending to corrupt has been confirmed on a number of occasions in recent years, especially in the field of local government when monopoly control enjoyed by both main parties has been well-established. Caucus rule untrammelled by effective democratic restraint has been given its head in too many areas for the good of democracy.

Finally, there is one other 'factual' consequence of the British electoral system worth noting. An elector, if he chooses to vote for a particular party, is unable to choose between individual candidates in that party. If his party's candidate, chosen usually by a small group of party activists, happens for example to represent a wing of the party not to his liking, then the elector's dilemma is a difficult one.

What Kind of Electoral Reform?

Electoral reform is frequently regarded as being synonymous with proportional representation, the implication being that the prime or even the only aim of reform should be that a political party be awarded seats in an assembly proportionate to the number of votes it received at the election.

This mechanistic view, however, despite its virtues is a limited one chiefly because an exclusive preoccupation with proportionality is bound to leave the voter's options too closely circumscribed. The elector's dilemma mentioned in the previous paragraph can be as pronounced with electoral systems striving for absolute proportionality as with the present system.

In Israel for example candidates' names do not appear on the ballot paper; only those of the political parties do so and a Labour supporter would simply vote for the Israeli Labour Party. The party is then allocated a number of seats in the Knesset proportional to the votes it has received in the one national constituency. The system achieves almost complete proportionality between parties but it can be argued convincingly that this quantitative achievement does not justify the qualitative decline in the democratic nature of the representation since the actual individuals who sit in parliament are nominees of the party machine thus completely depriving the ordinary voter of any influence he might otherwise have had in deciding this key democratic function.

This is an important principle connected ultimately with the quality of the democracy it inspires. A democratic electoral system should enable the voter as far as possible not only to support the political parties he prefers but also to choose the individuals from those parties who in fact constitute parliament. Indeed the system should go further. While in practical terms the political party is a convenient, perhaps essential, vehicle of representation it should not be exclusive. One could visualise for example a feminist who was more concerned with electing women rather than voting a party ticket.

The electoral system therefore should be designed to accommodate such essentially democratic aspirations as well as achieving party proportionality and a balance has to be struck between the two

aims. It is here that the democratic characteristics – trusting the people and the existence of a degree of consensus – have their roots. The ideal electoral system enables both characteristics not only to stimulate each other but also to develop the subtle and complex political interdependence of a genuine mass-democracy which is at the same time a decisive governing system.

“Reform of the electoral system should aim beyond strict party proportionality.”

The stark alternatives of British politics are a consequence of an over-developed party exclusivity brought about not least by the dichotomising bias built into the electoral system. For this reason preferential voting allowing voters the freedom just described is desirable despite the fact that it may lead to a slight loss of proportionality. Reform of the electoral system should aim beyond strict party proportionality although, clearly, greater proportionality than exists at present is essential. Achieving this fine balance between greater discretion for the voter and proportionality for the parties should be central to electoral reform. That is why a comparative assessment of the various available systems is of much more than academic interest. Furthermore the argument that because any system of proportional representation is better than existing electoral arrangements the choice of system should be made on the grounds of which one MPs are most likely to accept begs a crucial question, namely whose interest the system is designed primarily to serve, that of MPs or that of the democracy itself?

Systems of Proportional Representation

There are broadly two systems of pro-

portional representation which are commonly accepted as being appropriate to British circumstances although there are many adaptations of each. They are the 'multi-member' system with its preferential voting and the 'topping up' system. Confusion about the relative merits of the two arises from the fact that they are sometimes viewed from different standpoints; that of an MP and that of the voter.

Some MPs who are prepared to accept the need for electoral reform favour the topping-up system and decry the multi-member system. There is a jealous resentment at sharing a constituency with other members which may be rationalised by stressing the importance of an alleged personal link between a member and his constituency that can be forged only if the constituency has a single member. On the other hand evidence is strong that citizens who have elected MPs under a multi-member system are glad to have the opportunity of choosing any one from a number of MPs in their constituency to deal with problems.

There are many similar 'technical' advantages to be had under the multi-member system such as the greater proportion of women or blacks likely to be elected under it who would all rank as MPs of equal standing but the true merit of the system is incomparably more significant. It is that the system gives the voter more discretion in deciding the nature of his representation and thus indirectly of his democracy. Not only is a much higher proportion of the votes cast used to some purpose but the individual voter can express his preferences between two or more candidates from different wings of the same or any other party. Over time he will not only shape the character of 'his' party but it in turn will more sensitively respond to the subtleties which the voter with his greater discretion can now express. A doctrinal party like the Labour Party if it is to

remain in business will be obliged intellectually to regenerate itself — a process which in turn will lead towards nurturing consensus. The process is vital to the health of what is at present an excessively polarised British politics wallowing in the dogma of 50 years ago.

“Government in Britain today is demonstrably capricious, divisive and even undemocratic.”

The Quality of a Democracy

The foregoing brief look at some technical and quantitative aspects of British elections can hardly have concealed the real issues. They are qualitative ones and the mechanics of elections become important only because of their influence on the quality of democratic government. The demand for electoral reform grows inexorably because government in Britain today is demonstrably capricious, divisive and even undemocratic. It fails primarily in the democratic essentials of trusting the people and fostering a degree of consensus. Indeed the British parliamentary system of government seems today as if calculated to divide the British people and to produce a maximum of antagonism between two dominating sections of society — Big Labour and Big Business — which are allegedly in conflict with each other.

Before considering these defects in greater detail however, the causal connection should be clarified between the electoral system and the quality of British democracy. Perhaps one of the most succinct admissions that the connection is a direct one was that quoted by Professor H W R Wade in his 1980 Hamlyn lectures.

“I cannot help quoting” said Professor Wade “since it reveals the situation so candidly, the guidance issued several times in 1976 and 1977 by the General Secretary of

the Labour Party, urging that Labour supporters should oppose proportional representation as the method of election for the European Parliament. His argument was that it would then become difficult to resist pressure for proportional representation in the British Parliament and he was reported as saying: 'Proportional representation means coalition government at Westminster on the lines of our European partners, and it is goodbye then to any dreams or aspirations for a democratic socialist Britain'. There could hardly be a more honest admission that the party could not carry out its policy if the voting system fairly reflected the wishes of the electors and that it must rely on the possibilities, indeed probabilities, of what the Blake Commission called 'flagrant minority rule'."

There are probably as many definitions of democracy as there are of socialism and thus one man's 'dreams or aspirations for a democratic socialist Britain' might not necessarily be the same as another's who also regarded himself as a democrat and a socialist. However, if one takes democracy simply to mean no more than the endorsement through the ballot box of the broad policy proposals of a government and putting aside questions of participation and representation to influence that policy, the Party Secretary's admission is a devastating commentary on the Party's attitude to democracy. But the admission is even more ominous and malign than might appear at first sight.

The editorial in the *Guardian* newspaper of 16 June 1980 discussing the then current constitutional controversy in the Labour Party together with the Party Commission of Inquiry's newly published proposals for strengthening party democracy boldly proclaimed that 'The electorate is Labour's final judge'. The article went on to argue that 'the ultimate test' of the Commission of Inquiry's recommendations was whether they would strengthen

or weaken the Party's appeal to the electorate next time round. That may have been so, but only in the limited sense of what was electorally expedient for the Labour Party within the existing system. The real issues facing the country – 'the ultimate test' – are broader.

One accepts for argument's sake that the basic issue convulsing the Labour Party in recent years has been that of democracy. It is here that the question arises of whether the *Guardian's* proclamation was not an over-simplification of some significance, or whether in Britain the electorate really is the final judge. The evidence is now overwhelming and well-documented that the electorate at best is less influential in that role than it should be in a democracy and thus incidentally more cynical, and that at worst it has become irrelevant. It has already been pointed out for example that on two occasions since the war a party has gained a majority in the House of Commons and consequently formed a government although another party had received greater support from the electorate while governments elected by minority votes have now become a permanent British peculiarity.

However, the cancer is deeper-seated than might be suggested by a couple of arithmetical aberrations. The unhappy circumstances of the Labour Party controversy – the *Guardian* article's subject matter – arise ultimately from the fact that Labour has become a doctrinal party without a doctrine. It is the intellectual sterility and barrenness that causes most concern to 'democratic socialists' conscious that 'Labour is nothing if not a crusade' and anxiously seeking a credible contemporary ideology to crusade for.

The Party General Secretary, however, was content in the knowledge that there is really no need for a valid doctrine or even a set of credible policies to gain the support of a majority of the electorate. Hidebound party activists know that under the British

electoral system their turn will come, if not next time round then the time after. The swing of the pendulum is a certain feature of that system.

Here lies the malign nature of the Party Secretary's advice. In its cynical repudiation of the need for intellectual regeneration it panders complacently to the simplistic rhetoric of the reactionary and the atavist. His advice was an admission not only that the 'democratic socialism' being offered is unattractive to the British people but that the Party knows this and is content to let it be so. In short the Party exists for no other democratic purpose than to get itself elected by exploiting the perversity in the rules.

It is here that a democrat arrives at his truly 'ultimate test'. The test can be defined succinctly. The real threat to democracy arises when it is no longer necessary for policy to be credible. The causal connection between the electoral system and the quality of British democracy is thus manifested. More worrying still (given the idiosyncratic nature of the country's constitutional arrangements) is the fact that it would not need a great deal more cynicism than that flaunted in the Party Secretary's advice, for British democracy to be immediately under a grave direct threat arising from an imprudent exercise by Parliament of its sovereign power.

Historical Change

A sceptical response to his argument of course, would be to ask how Britain has succeeded over the centuries in maintaining her stable democracy which has been the envy of the world? The short answer is that her electoral system at anyone time reflected social and political reality to best advantage and that it is precisely this which is no longer the case. The history of England has been characterised by Perry Anderson as being that of a country enjoying a unique continuum in

its ruling class. From the Civil War onwards – itself hardly revolutionary by French standards – the historical process contrived to produce a ruling class which as an amalgam of established agrarian aristocracy and newly emergent manufacturing bourgeoisie was not only peculiar to England but provided the basis for a rare political stability. The political balance enjoyed in the England of the last century would hardly have been realised if the composition of its ruling class had suffered from the discontinuities common to many other countries. Furthermore the imperialist tradition reaching its climax during the latter part of the nineteenth century contributed to the sense of undisturbed and easy superiority and reflected itself in the unabashed jingoism of the turn of the century. Geography too played its part in sparing the island country from the traumatic experience of an invading army. Thus the continuum was consolidated and the national psychology set in its distinctive consensual mould of superior, chauvinistic conceit.

It was a psychology conditioning Englishmen to a world where Britannia carried the white man's burden across an empire on which the sun never set, where a quarter of the world's population were grateful British subjects, where the phrase 'the thin red line' somehow transformed brute imperialism into the inspiring chivalry of amateur gentlemen practising the virtues of *noblesse oblige*. In this world aristocrat and manufacturing bourgeois, hybridised during the long continuum and not a little helped by the peculiar English invention of the public school, together provided the imperial success which the new British state used in its mystification processes so that the proletariat became willing and docile partners in the continuous development of capitalist Britain. The consensus within the minority ruling class was faithfully reflected by the burgeoning proletariat, at least for a little

while longer.

During the latter half of the twentieth century, however, it has all come to an end – the success, the power, the imperial role, the tacit consensus; – to all appearance within a generation. It is a bitter pill to swallow and it is all the more difficult therefore to make the substantial adjustment towards mass-democracy and the development of new skills and institutions required for its effective government. The inertia is at its greatest, the traditions most entrenched in Parliament, that ultimate repository of power at the apex of the hierarchy upon whose sovereignty has rested the constitutional tradition of the United Kingdom, whose privileges have been sacrosanct, whose authority absolute, whose voice has decided the fate of continents and where clashes between the front benches have been sufficient acknowledgement of democratic pretensions.

The accretion of such complete power by Parliament, extraordinary though it appears today, was a natural consequence of the stability and success provided by a ruling class which had remained a small minority of the population. It is noteworthy for example that even after the great industrial leap forward in the early nineteenth and late eighteenth centuries the Reform Bill of 1832 skillfully limited the extension of the franchise to the new manufacturing bourgeoisie only.

One consequence of that stability was the unwritten constitution. There was never a post-revolutionary moment nor one after a war of independence or *coup d'etat* or even secession when the Englishman had to sit down to pen his new constitution. The British constitution 'just grewed'. There were no extra-parliamentary estates of the realm to cause difficulty. The crucial political requirements were met, that a consensus existed within what was a small exclusive ruling society and that parliament in fact represented it. Indeed in 1850 half

the members of the House of Commons were blood relations.

Contemporary society however, is not that of the nineteenth-century although the last vestiges of the closed, consensual circle which constituted the establishment of that time persisted into the post-war period (for example Major Attlee each day read first the births, marriages and deaths columns and secondly the cricketing columns of *The Times* and although not announced in those columns, post-war leaders of the Conservative Party still 'emerged' into being).

Radical constitutional reform is now urgently needed to reflect a new society and its masses. The key to this process lies within the electoral system. A seemingly minor piece of the old machinery – the simple majority system of election which, rather like a show of hands, might have been adequate for electing a parliament at the end of the nineteenth-century – is clearly unsuitable for a modern mass-democracy which will not function adequately if the political intention is merely to replace a lumpen-proletariat by a lumpen-graduriat! The plain fact is that the electoral system no longer reflects society to advantage – indeed in its failure to adapt to modern requirements it has exercised a malign influence on British parliamentary democracy both in theory and practice.

“In theoretical terms the very concept of a supreme parliamentary authority... is itself hardly reconcilable with that of a full-blown, participatory or even representative mass-democratic society.”

Theoretical Objections

In theoretical terms the very concept of a

supreme parliamentary authority, constrained by neither written constitution nor constitutional court, directing the affairs of a modern highly centralised, unitary state is itself hardly reconcilable with that of a full-blown, participatory or even representative mass-democratic society such as, one assumes, social democrats aspire to (one uses the phrase social democracy since democratic socialism has become altogether too ambiguous, the noun having the adjective by the throat!). The anomaly is compounded when the executive, represented in practice by half a dozen members of the inner cabinet, dominates parliament through its highly developed whipping system, the extraordinary effectiveness of which is itself traceable to the electoral system and the dichotomous nature of British party politics. More ominous still in the case of the Labour Party is the increasing erosion of the representative nature of the MP and the shift of power quite openly from parliament to the party.

There has thus been a clear failure in post-war years to adapt the parliamentary institutions and the political structures of the state to the needs of mass-democracy and the representation of the people. Instead there has been a shift of power towards the extra-parliamentary agencies of government, managers and unions, and most recently party. Any attempt to resolve the dilemma requires at the very least that representation should be as true a reflection as possible of the general will of the people and not of sectional interests and should be designed towards fostering such a general purpose. We have already seen, however, that this minimum but seminal requirement is completely subverted by the existing simple majority system used in British elections. It is clear therefore that a powerful argument exists in theoretical terms for radical change.

Practical Objections

The damage done in practical terms through an outmoded political structure buttressed by an undemocratic electoral system is even more obvious and ubiquitous. The one heartening sign amidst the gloom of Britain's chronic post-war decline has been the growing realization that the roots of the problem are not in economics and that the decline will not be reversed by a government simply adopting technically 'correct' economic strategies. There are now many references in the literature to deeper-seated sources of infirmity. Bernard Crick for example, as long ago as 1964 was pointing to more subjective but no less real influences: 'Britain today suffers under the burden of three native curses: that of amateurism, that of 'inner circle' secrecy, and that of snobbery. All three seem to debase both the quality of political life and the energy of economic activity. The unreformed Parliament is more than a symbol of these things; it helps to perpetuate them by the most effective of all forces in politics and society - example; if Parliament were reformed, the whole climate of expectations could change, much of the sweet fog we muddle through might lift . . .' (quoted by Tom Nairn in *New Left Review*).

The 'sweet fog' has since been dissipated by straightforward disenchantment. Roy Jenkins when he left Westminster to become President of the EEC Commission expressed the view that 'When all possible qualifications have been made there can be no doubt that the British political system has failed adequately to promote the long-term interests of the British people - not merely over the last 20 years, but over a much longer period. In my view there can also be no doubt that that failure has been due, not merely to obdurate circumstances, but to some features of our system of government and politics and to the conventions

and assumptions which underpin it' (*op cit*).

Dennis Kavanagh writing at the end of 1978 refers to criticism focussing no longer on economics and society but on '... the political institutions particularly the workings of the two-party system and the sovereignty of parliament'. Finally Tom Nairn in a comprehensive yet succinct paragraph expresses most radically the now growing agreement: 'So it would be more accurate to say that the nature of the state is the proximate cause of the British crisis. It is our constitution, our political and administrative system, and an associated penumbra of civil hegemony, powerful yet hard to define which maintain society on its hopeless course... What is this nature?... The unwritten constitution reposing sovereignty upon the Crown-in-parliament rather than the people; a two-party political order placing stability before democracy;...' (*op cit*)

It is this failure to transfer sovereignty to the people which is at the heart of the matter and it is here that a start must be made on the cure, complicated though the sickness may be. And the first move must be in the matter of electing parliament, the practical first step towards more comprehensive reform. It is significant that the immediate symptom of British democracy's morbidity is the low esteem in which the electorate holds parliament and the cynicism with which it regards politicians. It is certainly not too fanciful to argue that parliamentary shortcomings have themselves been a major stimulus to the weakening of morale, the collective loss of will and the political cynicism now plaguing British society.

The Simple Majority or First-past-the-post system converts marginal differences in numbers of votes cast for parties at an election into significant differences in the numbers of parliamentary seats they hold. The extraordinary probability – there is in present British circumstances an

almost actuarial certainty to it – that if three parties were respectively to receive 34, 33, and 32 per cent of the votes then one party could be awarded 350 seats and another only 50 seats is made even more bizarre by the possibility that the party with the largest number of votes could receive the fewest seats. Thus by its very arithmetic the system sustains the dichotomy which for so long has been, at least apparently, a feature of the house of Commons and which now, in the absence of the nineteenth-century consensus, is real as well as apparent. Difficulties are bound to arise in any modern industrial state, especially where government has an almost absolute constitutional dominance, if small changes in national sentiment produce such capricious changes in representation. The immediate practical consequence is the stridency introduced into the political process. It is a kind of inverse to the law of diminishing marginal utility with parties ever more outrageously outbidding each other for the last one per cent of the votes.

“In short the transition from oligarchy to democracy has been bungled and made more difficult by the electoral system.”

This has led to a depreciation of the franchise. Universal suffrage has turned out to be no more than a quasi-democratic veneer laid over an old oligarchy. The roots of the present-day British malaise are bedded in this deceit. A modern advanced state depending on the professionalism of its people has no role for a lumpen-graduarat passively accepting whatever lot its betters in their capricious ways provide for it as its nineteenth-century proletarian grandfathers were content to do. The need instead is to develop a role for a mass-citizenry displaying the authority, responsibility, self-

discipline and assurance that membership of a true democracy demands. To this end the necessary degree of consensus about basic objectives and the country's destiny has to be fostered by the political system. In Britain however, two major parties are obliged to vie with each other at elections pandering to the masses with policies of 'bread and circuses'. The syndrome is established of simplistic and open-ended demands from the voters for all manner of goodies on the one hand and cynical promises from would-be rulers on the other to deliver the moon in return for a few votes every four or five years. The whole thing is profoundly anti-democratic. Any sense of mass-democratic participation by citizens shouldering heavy but creative responsibilities, difficult though this may be to engender, is actively discouraged. In short the transition from oligarchy to democracy has been bungled and made more difficult by the electoral system.

In addition the system has imposed an immobility on the House of Commons itself. Here a stylised adversative posture remains sacrosanct – a kind of bedraggled and rather pathetic virility symbol for romantic sentimentalists hankering after past gladiatorial glories without realising that this is a luxury only to be afforded when a basic consensus exists. The two sides of the chamber are occupied by parties each of which vows when in power to undo what was achieved by the other when it, in its turn, held power. The posture with its premium on the simplistic at the expense of the meaningful has become a major stultifying influence on British attitudes.

It is not simply that British Members of Parliament are conditioned by the system into seeing the political issues in the starkest terms but that in addition it accentuates and perpetuates divisions and thereby promulgates facile solutions to unreal problems. That is why the real issues are

not tackled. They are to do ultimately with the political and social structures of the state, the democratic involvement they beget and the political leadership they inspire. It is why the Labour and Conservative parties not simply at their fundamentalist extremes but at their centres, are reactionary parties fighting the irrelevant battles of long ago. It is also why the British people are denied the political leadership to which they are entitled.

Anyone who would question the foregoing has only to listen to debates in the House of Commons where politics is still the old battle between the haloed angels on our side who can never do wrong and the horned devils on the other side who can never do right. One refrains from commenting on the superficialities of style which have developed in what passes for debate – the insensitive crudeness and the callow prejudice merging occasionally into baying infantilism.

What follows inevitably is that the British people scornfully drift into ever greater depths of cynicism. Even more deplorably they have to suffer the degrading spectacle of the party in opposition blaming the party which happens at any moment to form the government for all the complex problems of inflation, unemployment and low growth which have bedevilled their country for so long. There are numerous parliamentary examples of this cynical and cavalier approach to the political proprieties even on matters of immediate practicality. Ieuan Maddock has spoken of the Tweedledee-Tweedledum attitudes on policy where the opposition party not only opposes government policy but commits itself to reversing it at the first opportunity despite the fact that parliament may be dealing with an issue whose effects spread over many decades. Steel is a topical example of an industry which has suffered grievously from this parliamentary gamesmanship, the effect of which has

been blithely to nationalise the industry, to denationalise it, to renationalise it, to rationalise it, to review that rationalisation to intervene in its commercial management and now most recently to set cash limits and wash hands of it. There are a great many other specific examples of the perverse and malignant influence in a direct practical sense that post-war British parliaments have had on the country's affairs.

Conclusion: Alienation in a Democracy

At the theoretical core of the British system of parliamentary democracy is the representative role of the member of parliament. Here was the justification not only for granting parliament its absolute authority but also for the increasing dominance of the Commons within the parliamentary trinity. It was an adequate justification during the last century because representation adequately reflected the basic consensus within a governing class. Thus were nurtured the moral leadership and growing self-confidence of nineteenth-century Britain which in turn together confirmed the consensus even further and imposed its ethos on the proletariat.

“Parliamentary representation is inadequate not merely in that it neither represents nor nurtures a consensus but in that it does not even strike a reasonable balance between political parties and their support in the country.”

Britain's position today is different. Parliamentary representation is inadequate not merely in that it neither represents nor nurtures a consensus but in that it does not even strike a reasonable balance between

political parties and their support in the country. Thus in contrast to the past it promotes divisiveness, weakens leadership and erodes confidence. There is neither a self-confident governing class certain of its own mores nor is there a popular leadership deriving its momentum from the common will it has succeeded in stimulating.

British decline is therefore compounded and the country's problems are made intractable. There is a striking passage towards the end of Raymond Williams' novel, 'The Fight for Manod'. A senior British civil servant is speaking: 'The whole of public policy,' he said emphatically, 'is an attempt to reconstitute a culture, a social system, an economic order, that have in fact reached their end, reached the limits of viability. And then I sit here and look at this double inevitability: that this imperial, exporting, divided order is ending and that all its residual social forces, all its political formations, will fight to the end to reconstruct it, to re-establish it, moving deeper all the time through crisis after crisis in an impossible attempt to regain a familiar world. So then a double inevitability: that they will fail, and that they will try nothing else'.

The passage captures the British predicament. If a remedy is to be found then a new approach has to be adopted. There are of course a whole range of economic, cultural, social and historical facts and myths which mould the attitudes, aspirations and beliefs of the citizen. These latter will not readily be changed overnight so that Britain's new role might more readily be found and accepted. The first step however is clear; it is that 'the divided order' should be reconciled, that a basic consensus of all the people should be fostered, that democracy and the more difficult concept of mass-democracy be accepted as reality. In short the people must be represented as faithfully as possible and that means in the first instance an approp-

riate electoral system. Only then will the nineteenth-century's virtuous circle of parliamentary democracy begin to be re-established in contemporary Britain where consensus strengthens confidence which in turn accepts change.

“Electoral reform will not produce miracles overnight. It is no more than a key which will open a number of doors.”

The majority of our present political leaders will have none of it. Their way is that of the former general secretary of the

Labour Party with his predisposition for the elitist rule of the party caucus and the burgeoning of the *apparachik*. It is bound to fail because it produces an alienation within society. Here is the root cause of our failure to reverse British decline.

Electoral reform will not produce miracles overnight. It is no more than a key which will open a number of doors. When these are opened a process of change can be initiated in our political system which will be cumulative and which can reach out at the national psyche. At least within a reasonable time the country will be more truly a democracy. The democrat's faith is that the democratic way is also the effective way.

2 The Case Against Proportional Representation

Rosaleen Hughes and Phillip Whitehead

Supporters of Proportional Representation (PR) tend to make very large claims for it; 'One of the first essential steps to the regeneration of Britain.' and they load onto our present electoral system the blame for many evils which range from the adversarial destructive nature of debate in the House of Commons to a variety of the social and economic ills which beset Britain today. Even when their enthusiasm stops short of writing in green ink and capital letters the claims they make in favour of PR are wildly exaggerated with a disturbing lack of causal explanation. Nor are they always very specific about which type of PR they advocate.

“We can neither account for Italy’s 40 governments since the War simply by pointing to its electoral system of Proportional Representation nor blame the failure of British Steel to make a profit on our own single member plurality system.”

The first point which must be made about electoral systems is that blanket generalisations from one country to another and from one time to another are invalid. The one agreed conclusion of all research is that the electoral system is only one among a number of elements which determine the party system and the composition of governments. It is important not to exaggerate the role of the electoral system but to take into account also differences in political history, established concepts of the state and government, social and political structures and the role of political parties. So we can neither account for Italy’s 40 governments since the War simply by pointing to its electoral system of Proportional Representation nor blame the failure of British Steel to make a profit on our own single member plurality system.

The Electoral System and the House of Commons

Nevertheless the electoral system does influence both the composition of the House of Commons and the structure of the party system and two serious charges are levelled against our present system. Firstly, it is unfair and undemocratic and secondly, it is the main factor which has produced and maintained the two-party system which has served Britain ill and is now discredited and obsolete. We think it can be shown that these accusations rest on contentious assumptions about the nature of democracy, the role of the House of Commons and political parties, and that the anomalies and distortions in our present system would not necessarily be remedied by PR. Our contention is that the frustrations of our Parliamentary system have multifarious causes, not least what Keith Middlemas has called the prevalence of ‘crisis avoidance’ in statecraft over the past 50 years. A perfectly proportional system of representation upon which it was impossible to build a stable or resolute government would intensify these frustrations beyond endurance.

The most telling flaw in our present system is the anomalous results that it can

produce. It is unfair because it has consistently under-represented the Liberal Party and tended to over-represent small nationalist parties with a geographical basis of support. In the February 1974 General Election the Liberals won 19% of the popular vote and gained only 14 seats. It can also produce freak results such as in 1951 when the Conservatives won 48% of the vote and 321 seats while Labour with 48.8% of the vote won 295 seats. All electoral systems contain a bias in favour of large parties. This tendency to over-represent the largest parties can only be corrected by a very high 'district magnitude', that is very large constituencies, preferably the whole country as in Israel, where the whole country forms one constituency with candidates chosen from party lists. Douglas Rae has produced figures for 'vote-seat deviation' under different electoral systems. The average under proportional systems is 1.6, the average under majority systems is 3.96, but individual results vary considerably. As proof that anomalous results are not peculiar to Britain it is worth pointing out that in 1969 the Irish Labour Party increased its share of the vote from 15.4% to 17%, but the number of its seats fell from 21 to 18. Indeed Single Transferable Vote (STV) systems of PR, much favoured by the Liberals, can still lead to the party which gains most votes nationally losing the election, as has happened in Ireland, and, more recently, in Malta where Mr. Mintoff's party won the election, although it received considerably fewer votes than the Nationalist Party opposition.

The Role of Political Parties

The underlying assumptions behind arguments for exact proportional justice is that the prime function of political parties is to act as a reflecting mirror of national opinion on the House of Commons. This is to mis-interpret the role of political parties

in this country. Notwithstanding any number of broken moulds the evidence is that political parties are seen as Government and Opposition(s) with general elections as appeals by sets of ministerial teams rather than the representatives of interest groups. There is nothing about the recent successes of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) to suggest that they have radically altered the *functions* of political parties. The evidence is that the popularity of a party is more dependent upon its administrative competence and ability to handle the economy than upon its stance on other policy issues (see Butler and Stokes, *Political Change in Britain*). When Edmund Burke said that the House of Commons was the 'express image of the nation' it was in the context of limited suffrage, rotten boroughs and a House of Commons which made and unmade governments. The modern party system means that the people, through general elections, make and unmake governments. The British concept of the role of political parties is important because Proportional Representation was introduced into many countries in continental Europe after the First World War (often as a quid pro quo for universal suffrage) into a context where the role of political parties was very different. In continental Europe, with its traditions of bureaucratic absolutism rather than parliamentarianism, political parties are seen much more as sectional interest groups designed to secure concessions from the state. In Britain political parties have developed a national base inside Parliament and not as the representatives of disenfranchised groups excluded from the state. This has played a large part in developing political parties which are coalitions of interests rather than single issue parties. It is almost inconceivable that in this country we could have the counterparts of the Vital Interests of Celibates or the Wurttemberg Wine growers and Farmers Union which

adorned Weimar Germany or the Slovene Clericals and Czech Agrarians who adorned the Hapsburg Empire. Is anyone going to claim that political life is the poorer for an absence of a multiplicity of parties? It is interesting that the principal supporters of PR on the left are the leading luminaries of minor Marxist sects who could aim to build up a foothold in Parliament through PR, with their relatively tiny mass following, and their erstwhile allies now in the Labour Party who see that organism, once captured and drained of its internal coalition's present elements, kept alive by the drip-feed of a proportional system. Neither group, of course, sees Parliament as either meeting place or even metaphor for change through persuasion, but as a forum for the impossible demands made with maximum publicity.

The next accusation, which follows from 'unfair' is 'undemocratic'. The concept of democracy has been much squabbled over on the Left of late. Factions lay claim, with great certitude, to know the true meaning of the word. This certainty is not shared by academic theoreticians who find it an ambiguous and difficult concept, from which no perfect working system of government is to be derived without being facile.

Parliamentary democracy as it has evolved in Britain and those states loosely termed the 'Western Democracies' is essentially representative democracy. It means in practical terms that all of the people have a choice at certain points in time, not that some of the people have all the choice the whole time (the implication of 'active' 'mass' 'participatory' democracy). One of the assumptions fundamental to representative democracy is that the people are the ultimate judge but only at agreed intervals of time. Crucial decisions must be taken by a relatively small number of people with special expertise and *responsibility*, subject to dismissal, but with sufficient opportunity to be effective. The alternative concept of

democracy offers greater opportunities to those who are not elected but are qualified by their greater degree of interest and commitment to make decision-taking their main activity in life – the self-styled Praetorians of the 'democracy of the committed' whose representative theory of democracy comes down to them representing the general *will*.

A Representative Parliament

How can Parliament be made more representative and therefore more democratic? It obviously has glaring faults. There is the quite grotesque survival of the House of Lords. The unelected Upper House was, said Somerville, irrationally constructed in the way that a jury is. But it is a random selection of the hereditary aristocracy, the placemen, and the great and the good in their sunset years – a tribute to the fecundity of Charles II and the venality of Lloyd George and his imitators, an absurd anomaly today. Then there are the manifold faults of the Commons. The Commons is accused both of under-representing minorities, with its white, middle-aged and male composition, as well as being a forum for the sterile rhetoric and mutually destructive alternation of the major parties. Do either or both of these criticisms stand up?

The first interpretation has a good deal of substance in it. It is important that ethnic groups should have some representation in the House of Commons if they are to feel themselves 'law-givers' as well as 'law-obeyers' and to be properly integrated into society. It is also worrying that there are so few women in the House of Commons, and it ought to worry the Labour Party that the proportion of women on the 'B' or Constituency nominated list is greater than the number of candidates selected, and that the proportion of women candidates is lower than that of women MPs. But the predomi-

nantly white and masculine composition of Parliament is not self-evidently due to the electoral system. There are fewer women and members of ethnic minorities in nearly all the prestigious professions than their numbers would warrant. Effective remedies could just as easily be found by internal reform of political parties as by altering the electoral system.

“Any dispassionate analysis of Britain since the war would show that the centre *has* held. The major parties have been – and are still – grand coalitions in themselves of the left and the right of the political spectrum.”

The second interpretation is based on a false premise; that politics has an excluded middle, an unrepresented centre ground. This argument has come to the fore once Thatchery-Bennery replaced Butskellism, and shared assumptions, be they the welfare state or the mixed economy, came increasingly to be criticised. But any dispassionate analysis of Britain since the war would show that the centre *has* held. The major parties have been – and are still – grand coalitions in themselves of the left and the right of the political spectrum between individual and collective, capitalist and co-operative values. The inside left and the inside right have not been thrust aside; on the contrary they have been able to argue that in a party aiming for majority power theirs was a crucial role in reaching across the contested centre ground. It is no improvement upon this to break down the internal coalitions into a mass of contending fragments, as frequently happens under list systems of PR, or to give a permanent veto to the placemen of the inchoate centre as in added member systems. The first leads to coalitions formed *after* the electorate has spoken, as

we shall show; the latter to a paralysis of action where initiative passes to the archetypical centrist caucus man ‘sitting in the muddled middle, playing on his fuddled fiddle’ as Michael Foot has described it.

“Nor can it be said that the adversarial style of Commons debate is due to our electoral system or to ‘two old parties’... Obstruction, antagonism and filibuster were as common in a 4-party House of Commons as they are today.”

Nor can it be said that the adversarial style of Commons debate is due to our electoral system or to ‘two old parties’, any more than the rhetorical excesses of modern Italy or France under the Fourth Republic can be blamed on their PR systems. Obstruction, antagonism and filibuster were as common in a 4-party House of Commons as they are today. They were even more notorious under the bankrupt political system of Weimar Germany (which happened to operate by PR). What was needed was a supplement to Commons debates, not new and fancy franchises to elect the participants. The proper role of the Chamber in Parliament is to act as a forum for debate, to air all sides of the argument and different opinions are not always reconcilable even among men of goodwill. The constructive consensual work is done not on the floor of the House but in Committees, in the scrutiny of legislation and of the executive done by the Select Committees. It is the introduction of these which was arguably the single most practical step towards the enhancement of democracy, not a tinkering with the mechanics of the electoral system.

Pluralism and the Centre

PR fanatics make much of our exaggerated

“Where these have been abrupt reversals of policy these reflect genuine divergences in the country.”

swings of electoral fortune, allowing one government entirely to demolish the work of its predecessor. Tweedledum dismantles Tweedledee before turning to matters of national survival . . . this is a travesty of the truth. Even in the sharpened antagonisms of the Seventies, where Roy Jenkins has claimed that ‘only one piece of major legislation enacted by the Heath administration remains on the Statute Book’, major reorganisations of local government, the NHS and industrial finance did remain in force, whilst the initiative in Northern Ireland – accepted by Labour – fell to extra-parliamentary action. Governments have a positive programme of their own to implement, what they tend to do is to leave much of their predecessors’ legislation alone, undo bits of it and amend bits. Where there have been abrupt reversals of policy these reflect genuine divergences in the country. It is unfortunately, or otherwise, the case that there is wide disagreement over trade union immunities and the closed shop and if either a Labour or Conservative government enacts legislation which reflects either of the extremes of opinion it is more than likely that a change of government will result in an attempt to change the law. This division of opinion is not artificially manufactured by our electoral system; it genuinely exists.

“Do we need to (exclude the policies of Tony Benn and Keith Joseph) with our centrist civil service hostile to reform, let alone experiment?”

Is it damaging, is it more damaging than the alternative which would result from PR – a permanent domination of government by the centre with the exclusion of radicals of both the right and the left from influence let alone power? Both the policies of Tony Benn and Keith Joseph are equally intensely disliked but they are admitted as legitimate within the tolerances of our political system. Some would say it were better for the country if neither had any influence on government, but to say that is to call for an extraordinary narrowing of the range of options. Do we need to do that with our centrist civil service hostile to reform, let alone experiment? What if the government of men of good-will and reasonable opinions should fail to deal adequately with inflation and economic decline and there is no credible opposition but the extremes of right and left? The price of continuity will be stultification at best and at worst a dangerous disenchantment of radicals with Parliament and due process. (The so-called dangerous anti-democrats in the Labour Party do still think there is a great deal of purpose in becoming an MP). The ultimate consequence of excluding radicals from the ‘politics of the possible’ will be to drive them to the politics of the street. Part of the insidious appeal of the Red Brigades and the Baader Meinhof groups in Italy and Germany was that the ‘real left’ was wholly excluded from power. Italy’s 41 post-war governments and Germany’s bipartisan tolerance of *Berufsverbot* have marked out an exclusion zone where opinions ought to be admitted to share power and influence. *Le vote ne change rien* is a powerful and terrible cry. PR does nothing to prevent it; sometimes the reverse.

Those who claim that PR will entrench centre parties often forget, too, that whilst the preconditions for such parties to develop, in a fissile system of proportionality, are more likely to exist, they may be

consortia of office seekers and populists, nothing more. It was Roy Jenkins who said in 1973 of the idea of a centre party 'A party based on such a rag-bag could stand for nothing positive. It would exploit grievances and fall apart when it sought to remedy them . . . It is the duty of leaders to seek to synthesise and give reality to people's aspirations, not to separate and exploit their conflicting grudges'. This process of synthesis ought to embrace grand coalitions within the serious parties. PR does the reverse, by putting a premium on the faction that sees its opportunity to splinter off, regardless of the consequences.

What Has PR to Offer?

Proportional representation is often spoken of as though it is the embodiment of an abstract justice. It is nothing of the kind. The idea has been supported, historically, for reasons of both self-interest and idealism. At Westminster the choice tends to be presented, in the words of Keith Kyle, as 'between the Liberal Party never in office and the Liberal Party in office all the time'. But there are a good many systems which are loosely described as PR; advocates of one are often vehemently opposed to others, within the general principle of 'proportionality' and 'fairness'. What we must ask each of the variants on offer is this; in what way are they fairer? Do they ensure that opinion is represented at Westminster, with some sensitivity between elections, and in a way which allows the promises of the representatives to be monitored and checked by their constituents? Do these same representatives remain as open and identified to their electors as they presently do? Is caucus rule more or less of a possibility? Can governments be formed with a reasonable span of life to perform on what they promised? We submit that these, too, are all legitimate tests of 'fairness'.

“Historically Proportional Representation was taken up by . . . those who feared that the coming of a wider franchise would usher in something like mob rule.”

Historically Proportional Representation was taken up in the nineteenth Century in Britain (and implemented in the twentieth in the newer democracies of post 1918 Europe) by those who feared that the coming of a wider franchise would usher in something like mob rule. J S Mill and other early advocates thought it would prevent the ignorant masses from swamping the educated minority, and would ensure the election to Parliament of men able to provide mature political leadership. There was a measure of proportionality in the 1867 'limited vote' – multi-member seats where the elector had fewer votes than there were seats – famously thwarted by Joe Chamberlain's Birmingham caucus, where the disciplined Liberal voters were marshalled to spread their multiple votes evenly among Liberal candidates, thus squeezing out their opponents in the multi-member seats. It vanished in 1884 along with most of the two member constituencies, but plural voting lingered in the university seats until abolished by the Attlee government. (Ironically the nascent Labour Party had for a period supported PR, and when the 1916 Speaker's Conference recommended a mix of preferential systems – Alternative Voting (AV) in the counties and Single Transferable Voting (STV) in multi-member borough seats – 53 Liberal MPs voted against! As their majority was only seven in the House they may be said to have dished PR. Despite the hung parliaments of the 1920s, and a roll-call of the great and the good in its support (they were all there; Asquith and Birkenhead and Cecil, the Master of

Balliol and the Archbishop of Canterbury, with J H Thomas as court jester) PR still found no mass support at Westminster. A bill to introduce the preferential (but not proportional) Alternative Vote (AV) as the price of Liberal tolerance of the second minority Labour government passed the Commons, was blocked in the Lords, and lapsed with the fall of the government. The issue was raised again in the 70s, in the context of both devolution proposals and the introduction of direct elections for the European Assembly. Again PR was defeated.

Following the 1974 election result a conventional wisdom has grown up amongst advocates of PR, firstly that the old two-party system is dead, but the two old parties still dominate because of the direct preference system, vampires suckled on the political lifeblood of smaller and newer parties; secondly that almost *any* PR system would be bound to be better than what we have now. To the first point we would reply that two parties are not necessarily the sole beneficiaries of our voting system, nor is there anything which gives either of them a parson's freehold. There have been three and four party parliaments, hung parliaments remembered neither for achievement nor longevity. One of the big parties has been replaced; it could happen again. In fact the "historic decline" of the two parties' share of the vote is something of a fraud. We are usually given the figures for 1950 and 1974 (a fall from 89.6% to 75%). If we compared 1979 (80.3%) with 1945 (87.6%) or 1924 – the first election at which Tory and Labour were identifiably the bigger parties – (81.3%) we do not see such wide variations over half a century. We would argue that the two-party domination is more likely to be ended when one of the constituent parts of one of the parties ignores the ground rules for operating as a coalition in itself – currently Labour's crisis and the Social Democrats' perhaps fleeting

opportunity. With a distinctive radical programme, identifiable in the way that the small nationalist parties' programmes have recently been, they too might achieve the success denied to the Liberals. But they have nailed their colours to the fence that marks out the centre ground.

Such a party might well be everybody's second preference. Its leadership have therefore taken up the Liberal call for PR with varying degrees of conviction. The great and the good go with them. There is even a certain insouciance about which form of PR should be used. As a Labour convert Austin Mitchell MP confesses; 'Nothing does more to harm PR than the PR enthusiast. With his Droop Quota, his alternate member, and his D'Hondt rule he sounds like that other species of fanatic the sex shop owner. There is no need to bog the argument down. Systems are there for most purposes...' But the merits of the systems need to be discussed rather than glossed over. Then their various disadvantages have an awkward habit of appearing. We therefore look across the range on offer, from perfect proportionality without individual ranked choice to maximum voter preference with less (or virtually no) proportionality. Is there a best buy?

“But the merits of the systems need to be discussed rather than glossed over. Then their various disadvantages have an awkward habit of appearing.”

The National List. The only way to get perfect proportionality, if this is what you want, is to make the whole country one constituency. Israel is one such. The party caucus draws up and ranks the list. After the recent Israeli election the big parties touted for support among the other nine parties with 25 seats between them in the Knesset. The price Mr Begin recently paid

to secure the support of a tiny group of ultra religious fanatics is too well known to need labouring. It was certainly not an example of PR giving the centre extra leverage! No serious person suggests a national list system for a country the size of Britain. Nor is it forgotten that the national lists of Weimar Germany did nothing whatsoever to dilute or frustrate the rising strength of the Nazis.

The Regional List comes much closer to home, for it is the commonest form of PR used in Europe. The country is broken down into regions rather than constituencies. Sometimes the lists are ranked, occasionally not. There is thus some regional identification and can be voter preference between candidates of the same party. A version of the Finnish system was recommended for Britain for the Euro elections, but voted down at Westminster. It would still allow a vote to be transferred to candidates on the list who were anathema to the individual voter, and for the election of unpopular figures who contrived to get on the list. List systems tend to encourage a proliferation of parties, to the extent where government becomes almost impossible. Italy's 41 governments since the war have been a high price to pay for proportionality – as were the 25 governments of the French Fourth Republic between 1945 and 1958, only two lasted a year. In the Netherlands, which votes a national list in 18 regional districts, the 1981 election on May 26 saw ten parties represented in the Dutch Lower House, only one of which had as much as 30 percent of the vote. It took 118 days thereafter to form a government on 11 September – and this government fell three weeks later. With examples like this in mind we are sceptical of PR zealots' jibes that governments elected under the British system are as unpopular as they are short-lived. (In fact the average length of British adminis-

trations since the war has been a respectable 26 months).

The List System The one real advantage claimed for the list system is that it forces the party to put its best face forward – to achieve that balance amongst its candidates which the individual selection conferences of a hundred local parties, all eager for the identikit ideological model, will not do. We do not dispute that this *might* happen – if the ruling caucus so decided. But that wisdom denied to selection conferences – judging by some recent performances – may not be revealed in the higher echelons of the caucus. Must would be lost, for little gain, if a whole national or regional 'slate' were captured for factional ends. It would come back, as it does in the present system, to that judgement of the voters which even the fanatic must eventually heed.

The Additional Member System This has been proposed for Britain by the Hansard Society. Something very like it exists in West Germany, and is often cited by PR enthusiasts as responsible for everything from the *Wirtschaftswunder* to Germany's victory in the World Cup. In fact it works because Germany works, not *vice versa*, and it contains within it safeguards against the purer proportionality of Weimar Germany. Half the members of the Bundestag are elected first-past-the-post in individual constituencies, as in Britain. This number is then topped up, in proportion to votes cast for a national list, with extra members. There is a 5 percent cut-off below which no members are allowed. The German Liberals, the FDP, who have not been able to win a single constituency by simple majority for over 20 years, survive as long as they stay above this 5 percent line. In 1976 they fell to 7.9 percent, but rose in 1980 to 10.5 percent. They were in greatest peril in 1969, when they fell to 5.8 percent but still received 30 seats. Yet this party can be the universal

harlot of the German system; always in the governmental bed with the highest bidder. It acts as a brake on the SPD (for example in opposing any attempt to reform the Common Agricultural Policy). In return it helps to keep out the Christian Democrats, even when they are the largest party, with over 48 percent of the total vote – so much for ‘fairness’. Its only price; office for 17 of the 20 years in which it has failed to get a single constituency seat.

“The Society were forced to recognise the deep attachment in Britain to the single member constituency, and the identified representative.”

The Hansard Society have proposed a British version of this hybrid. Under it the House of Commons would be enlarged to 680. Three-quarters of these MPs would be elected as at present in (larger) single member constituencies. The remaining quarter would be topped up from regional lists. The Society were forced to recognise the deep attachment in Britain to the single member constituency, and the identified representative. What then would be the role of the added members, especially if, as the Society recommended, they were drawn from the losers who had performed best? Inevitably they would seek a constituency role. The great cry of the Caucus Race would be heard in the land; ‘Everyone has won and everyone must have prizes’. AMS also is less fair to the voter, who has absolutely no say over who these 160 interlopers would be, yet they might determine the pace and direction of every government he thought he was helping to elect.

“List systems do not need that valuable barometer the by-election.”

It is also worth pointing out that under all these systems there is less opportunity for the voter to make his opinion felt *between* elections. List systems do not need that valuable barometer the by-election. The next person on the list simply fills the vacancy. In the Euro elections big names were put at the top of the list in some countries who had no intention of taking up their seats, and over fifty of the victors have in fact resigned to make way for an alternate, often by prior arrangement. There have been no by-elections!

The Single Transferable Vote The manifold weaknesses of the above systems have led the PR lobby spearheaded by the Liberals, the Electoral Reform Society and latterly the SDP to concentrate on STV – the single transferable vote in multi member constituencies. This preference system is discussed as though there were a particular purity to it, which has escaped many of those who have to practice it, whether in Malta, Ireland, or Cook Country Illinois. With STV you say goodbye to the single member constituency, though not to constituency politics. The voter is placed in a multi member constituency – 3, 5, or 7, and has one vote to transfer by expressing preferences in order among all the individual candidates on the ballot paper. The latter are deemed elected when they pass a quota, the Droop quota, worked out by the d’Hondt formula,

$$\frac{V}{S+1} + 1$$

(the number of votes cast is divided by the number of seats plus one, this figure plus one is the minimum number of votes needed to secure election). In the Northern Ireland Euro election the total vote was 572,239. Divided by 3 + 1 this gave a quota of 143,060). As each candidate passes the quota his surplus over it is redistributed according to second preferences, until each seat is filled. Majority parties are still over-represented, but much less so than they are in Britain. The

elector knows that his preferences will count with less waste, although some votes will still be more equal than others, if they are cast for a first time winner and then transferred to other successful candidates.

But other things happen. In Britain the multi-member constituencies would be large in population – half a million or more, and in the sparsely populated rural areas gigantic in size. The real personal link between the MP and his constituency party and one group of 65,000 electors would go. Larger scale party machines would come into their own. Manipulation of constituency sizes would be a constant temptation, for you get very different results in 3- and 5-member seats. By plumping for a range of one to eight-member constituencies in their policy paper the SDP have got the worst of both worlds. There will be no proportionality in four seats (all currently held by minority parties!) and a medley of uneven proportionality elsewhere, ignoring the ease with which such variable constituency sizes can be manipulated within the system, according to whether 3, 5, 7 or 8 members are elected.

“Elections come thick and fast. Governments are stapled together after the event by open pork-barrel bargaining.”

It is not all that obvious when we look across the water that all the evils of the British system, so relished by advocates of PR, have actually been avoided. There is caucus rule, within the parties – themselves differentiated less by ideology than by ancient quarrels, and their candidates distinguished by how close their fathers had been to the Post Office in 1916. Elections come thick and fast. Governments are stapled together after the event by open pork-barrel bargaining, like Mr Haughey's buying the last vote he thought

he needed in 1982 for over £100 millions. We do not think it adds up to any kind of regeneration, and certainly has not been so for the Irish Labour Party, which has on occasion increased its vote and actually lost seats. the Electoral Reform Society themselves admit that the Droop Quota can give ‘perverse results’.

“One such (casualty) is the MP who has the courage to go against consensus ideas.”

One such is the elimination of the MP who has the courage to go against consensus ideas, and this becomes a casualty of the hostile transferred preference. Conor Cruise O'Brien lost his seat in the Republic of Ireland, when he would have retained it had first preferences carried the day. Another is that governments can and do manipulate STV constituencies to their own advantage; a 3-member seat constructed to give two seats to the largest party, or three in a 5-member seat, if discipline prevails among party voters on their transfers. (‘Full ticket voting’ in the 1981 Irish election was put at 78% for both Fianna Fail and Fine Gael in the study by Sinnott and Whelan). Thus the amount of plumping is less great than supporters of STV often claim. Results can be remarkably similar to those under a direct voting system, as the 1977 Irish election was. What then do we get, to make this system the best buy for PR enthusiasts? Robert Newland of the Electoral Reform Society, as well as claiming greater stability of government and representation of all parties in all areas, sums up thus; “Electors are released from the strait jacket of spurious representation in an artificial single-member constituency by an MP whose views they may oppose. MPs and Councillors, no longer elected by a mere relative majority and consequently embarrassed by the fiction of having to repre-

sent the heterogeneous electorate of a whole constituency, can now confidently speak for a homogeneous Quota or constituency of opinion."

"It is a stark accountability unknown in list systems, uncommon in the largest and most proportional STV constituencies."

We are not impressed by these arguments. Single member constituencies of roughly equal size leave the MP compelled to take account of all sections of opinion to whom he is answerable. He has to carry his local party and his local constituents with him, and balance their interests and opinions. He cannot hide behind the list or the caucus. He has no soft second chance as the most favoured loser. It is a stark accountability unknown in list systems, uncommon in the largest and most proportional STV constituencies. If the argument is that, even so, the MP is frequently not the choice of more than 50 percent of his electors' first preference, then the answer may be to allow the non-proportional alternative vote in single member constituencies. This would increase the chances of the third party candidates who came a close second, and actually change the result in perhaps some twenty constituencies (if the proportions were similar to the most recent results for the Australian lower house, where Alternative Voting is used) so that every candidate ended up with majority support. AV is little favoured by electoral reformers today, however; to them proportionality is all. Yet AV would do something to break up the concentrations of one-party representation, north and south, which have been much criticised in the present system. In any case, if the mould has been broken, as the SDP claims, there will be very few safe seats left.

European Elections

It has been said that if Britain takes part in the next Euro-elections in 1984, as she will if still a member of the Community, the case for PR will have been won by *force majeure*. The European Assembly's *Document 1-988/81* on a draft uniform electoral procedure for the election of its members came out for proportional rather than majority voting. It proposed a list system of multi-member constituencies with the allocation of seats by the d'Hondt system. This common system would allow exceptions only 'for special geographical or ethnic factors', but 'it would be left to the Member States to decide how their territory was to be divided into constituencies and whether national or regional lists would be used.' The UK government in 1984 might choose to fall in line with such proposals, especially if it was under strong pressure from third and fourth parties at the time. We would admit that the sheer size of the electorate in the 81 British constituencies weakens arguments for the link between the individual Member and his constituents. Our Euro MPs low profile, lacking a real base and real problems to tackle, bears this out. There is an additional factor; the nature of the Assembly. The *Seitlinger Report* itself picks up the differences between the European Assembly and a national parliament, when it refers to the fact that some member states have returned from the proportional to the majority system. This was in the exceptional 'need to strengthen the executive at a specially difficult time in a particular country's history' (M Seitlinger is a Frenchman!) which 'does not arise in the Community institutions'. And why is this? Not because of the particular agonies of the PR cursed Fourth Republic. It is

more generally, because 'there is no Community government which is answerable to Parliament and which has therefore to be sustained by large and effective majorities.' The Assembly is different – a representative body indeed, but not one from which a government is drawn, nor to which one is accountable. That is the crucial difference. Our objections to PR are to its effect on the business of government and opposition in a national parliament. Therefore they do not apply with the same force to the European Assembly.

Conclusion

There are many constitutional reforms which are needed in Britain to bring about devolution of power and greater accountability of governments to electorates. Some would make a contribution to easing the malaise that has gripped Britain during years of political and economic decline. None however vitiate the case for effective governments, presenting clear programmes. For us that means majority Labour governments, able to show the electorate, in Tawney's words, that they can 'promise less, but demand more'. In this PR seems to us to offer little. Those who advocate it in Britain do so from the perfectly respectable ground of self-interest, knowing that it would indeed lead to the permanent coalitions of the continental systems which they admire. There is nothing especially admirable about the haggling after the event which distinguishes such coalitions, be they in Ireland, Israel or the Netherlands. True they can arise under our present system, but the last squalid months of the last Labour government, suspended by the hempen noose of the Ulster Unionists'

goodwill, hardly argues that we should deliberately make this the rule rather than the exception. PR would rule out the probability of majority Labour government again.

It seems to us that there is nothing dishonourable in arguing for such a majority Labour government, achieved by patience and persuasion from the reforming and progressive half of the country. And that means warning against a system which would destroy that larger hope.

It will be said that the impulses to fragmentation are already there, with the defection of the Social Democrats. But the bulk of the Labour coalition remains, conscious once more that it must maintain and widen its base of support. Those who believe that PR would attract out of the Labour Party those parasitic entryists who have drained much of its energy into infantile Leninist and Trotskyite spasms entirely misunderstand these sectarians. Other left sects might use PR – and some welcome it – to aim for a small percentage of the total vote. The entryists would not. The parasites would live with the host, and die with it, if Labour cannot build on its traditional support as a democratic and a socialist party. So PR is no answer to Labour's domestic difficulties.

Meanwhile, under PR, government would of course continue, built upon coalitions (sometimes including Labour or fragments of Labour) agreed on little more than hunger for office and the desire for consensus. For a country not in crisis this might be acceptable; for Britain it would not. In our present difficulties the fanatics of proportionality are irrelevant. The best we can say of them is that they resemble the old jibe against psychoanalysis; that it is the only disease which mistakes itself for its cure.

New Socialist

Fed up with the way the media rubbish socialist arguments?

Looking to understand the thinking behind debates on Labour policy? Excited by the new movements that challenge accepted ideas of the left? New Socialist is the answer you are looking for.

The riots, nuclear war, the block vote, feminists and the unions, Poland, the Social Democrats, skinheads, the alternative economic strategy and the future of socialism are all questions that New Socialist will examine in its first two issues.

The Labour Party's first-ever analytical and discussion magazine, published every two months, has assembled a list of contributors that includes: E P Thompson interviewing Michael Foot, Raymond Williams, Noam Chomsky, Mary Kaldor, Peter Townsend, Bernard Crick, Stuart Holland, Alan Sapper, Stuart Hall, Lewis Minkin, Tony Benn and Roy Hattersley.

NEW SOCIALIST was launched in September 1981 and the two-monthly magazine is on sale in newsagents and by subscription. We invite you now to make sure of your copy by subscribing for a year's supply of six issues to be mailed to you, post free, direct from the printers.

Readers who want to make a greater commitment to NEW SOCIALIST are invited to become LAUNCH SUBSCRIBERS. We aim to be self-financing, but managing a costly project on a very small budget is difficult. We offer you the chance to help the magazine grow, by taking out a launch subscription for £8—more if you can afford it. Launch subscribers can take part in the annual review conference and are invited to write for the magazine or suggest topics for coverage. Most important, you will be helping to build our working capital for the development of NEW SOCIALIST, which we hope will become a monthly in Autumn 1982.

- I would like to become a launch subscriber and enclose £8
- I would like to become an ordinary subscriber and enclose £3.75 for the first six issues of NEW SOCIALIST

Cheques and Postal Orders should be made payable to "NEW SOCIALIST"

NAME

ORGANISATION

ADDRESS

SEND TO NEW SOCIALIST SUBSCRIPTION DEPARTMENT,
150 WALWORTH ROAD, LONDON SE17 1JT.

TRIBUNE LABOUR'S INDEPENDENT WEEKLY

TRIAL SUBSCRIPTION OFFER

If you are not a regular reader of TRIBUNE why not take out a trial subscription. Fill in the form below and send it with £1 and you will be sent 4 issues of TRIBUNE.

Name

Address

.....

.....

Post to Subscription Dept., Tribune, 308 Gray's Inn Road, London
WC1X 8DY

THE BEST IN SOCIALIST JOURNALISM

recent fabian pamphlets

research series

331	Chris Ralph	The picket and the law	£1.50
334	Carl Wilms Wright	Transnational corporations	£1.50
337	Robin Cook, Dan Smith	What future in NATO?	£1.50
338	Alan Fox	Socialism and shop floor power	£1.50
340	Deepak Lal	Poverty, power and prejudice	£1.50
341	Tom Sherriff	A deindustrialised Britain?	£1.50
342	David Scott Bell	Eurocommunism	£1.50
343	J. Goode, D. Roy, A Sedgewick	Energy policy: a reappraisal	£1.50
344	A Fabian group	Can tenants run housing?	£1.50
345	David Taylor	India: the politics of change	£1.50
346	Robert Taylor	The crisis of American labour	£1.50
347	David Sainsbury	Government and industry	£1.50

tracts

462	Bryan Gould and others	The politics of monetarism	£1.50
463	Austin Mitchell	Can Labour win again?	£1.50
465	Peter Scott	What future for higher education?	£1.50
466	C. Pond, L. Burghes, B. Smith	Taxing wealth inequalities	£1.50
468	Evan Luard	Socialism at the grass roots	£1.50
469	Peter Hall (ed)	A radical agenda for London	£1.50
470	Roger Carroll	The two wage worker	£1.50
471	John Bowers, Suzanne Franks	Race and affirmative action	£1.50
472	John May	Justice, welfare and juvenile delinquents	£1.50
473	Paul Wilding	Socialism and professionalism	£1.50
475	Robin Cook	No nukes!	£1.50
476	Stuart Bell	How to abolish the Lords	£1.50
478	A Fabian Group	Against all reason	90p
479	Roy Kohn	Enforced leisure: enforced education	£1.50
480	ed. David Lipsey	Making government work	£1.50
481	David Basnett	The future of collective bargaining	£1.50
482	Betty Vernon	Margaret Cole 1892-1980	£1.50

young fabian pamphlets

44	Melvyn Westlake	World poverty: the growing conflict	£1.50
45	Geoff Harris	A wider Europe	£1.50
46	David Elliott	The Lucas Aerospace workers' campaign	£1.50
47	Tom Schuller	Education through life	£1.50
48	Mark Swift	A regional policy for Europe	£1.50
49	Mark Goyder	Socialism tomorrow	£1.50
50	Nick Butlin	The IMF: time for reform	£1.50

books

R.H.S. Crossman and others	New Fabian Essays	cased £1.75
Brian Abel-Smith and others	Socialism and affluence	paper £0.60
Peter Townsend and others	The fifth social service	paper £2.50

This pamphlet, in argument format, is a lively debate on the appropriateness of reform of the British electoral system. Is the present system biased against the centre and undemocratic in that it does not produce elected members who reflect the views of the electorate? Can a greater power to choose candidates within a particular party's nominations be introduced? Or is reform just a change which is not for the better and which produces results with as much, or even more undesirable features as our present system. This pamphlet examines a perennial yet topical issue.

Fabian Society

The Fabian Society exists to further socialist education and research. It is affiliated to the Labour Party, both nationally and locally, and embraces all shades of Labour opinion within its ranks – left, right and centre. Since 1884 the Fabian Society has enrolled thoughtful socialists who are prepared to discuss the essential questions of democratic socialism and relate them to practical plans for building socialism in a changing world. Beyond this the Society has no collective policy. It puts forward no resolutions of a political character. The Society's members are active in their Labour parties, trade unions and co-operatives. They are representative of the Labour movement, practical people concerned to study and discuss problems that matter.

The Society is organised nationally and locally. The national Society directed by an elected Executive Committee, publishes pamphlets and holds schools and conferences of many kinds. Local Societies – there are one hundred of them – are self governing and are lively centres of discussion and also undertake research.

The program of an earnest student, as a matter of fact, is not a mere
accumulation of facts, but a process of growth, a process of
learning to think, to act, to feel, to create. It is a process of
development, a process of becoming. It is a process of
learning to live, to love, to serve. It is a process of
learning to be a human being, to be a citizen, to be a
member of a community. It is a process of learning to be
a person, to be a human being, to be a citizen, to be a
member of a community.

Faber Society

The Faber Society is a group of students who are interested in
the work of the Faber Society. It is a group of students who
are interested in the work of the Faber Society. It is a group
of students who are interested in the work of the Faber Society.
It is a group of students who are interested in the work of the
Faber Society. It is a group of students who are interested in
the work of the Faber Society. It is a group of students who
are interested in the work of the Faber Society. It is a group
of students who are interested in the work of the Faber Society.

The Society is composed of students who are interested in
the work of the Faber Society. It is a group of students who
are interested in the work of the Faber Society. It is a group
of students who are interested in the work of the Faber Society.
It is a group of students who are interested in the work of the
Faber Society. It is a group of students who are interested in
the work of the Faber Society. It is a group of students who
are interested in the work of the Faber Society. It is a group
of students who are interested in the work of the Faber Society.

