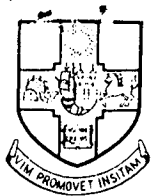


Report of the Independent Commission on the Voting System: Volume 2

Submissions from academics

Professor Ron Johnston and David Rossiter,
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The Secretary

Independent Commission on the Voting System

6th Floor

Clive House

Petty France

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Dear Sir

Enclosed please find a submission to the Commission.

Please let me know if there is anything more I can provide.

Sincerely

Ron Johnston

**Evidence to the Independent Commission
on the Voting System**

by

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and

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Introduction

1. The Commission's terms of reference invite it to 'observe the requirement for broad proportionality' and 'the maintenance of a link between MPs and geographical constituencies'.

2. The first of these requirements indicates that 'fairness to parties' should be a more important feature of the UK electoral system than has been the case to date, which means that the new electoral system must, at least in part, elect MPs from multi-member constituencies: the great weight of research shows that single-member constituencies and (quasi-)proportional representation are incompatible.

3. The second of the requirements implies, on a very broad reading, that the electoral system to be proposed must be constituency-based (i.e. elections cannot be conducted on a nation-wide basis, as in the Netherlands and Israel): on a more narrow reading, it suggests the need for a constituency system in which the constituencies are not so large that MPs are unable to build meaningful relationships with their electors.

4. Three electoral systems can meet these requirements:

- the single transferable vote in multi-member constituencies;
- party list systems in multi-member constituencies; and
- additional member systems which combine single-member constituencies (with MPs elected by either first-past-the-post - fptp - or the alternative vote - av) and multi-member constituencies using party list systems (in which the party list may exclude candidates standing for the single-member constituencies or may comprise those unsuccessful in the single-member contests).

All three have disadvantages according to the requirements set out in the Commission's terms of reference.

5. The single transferable vote system (stv) was not designed to produce proportional representation but rather to maximise voter choice. In elections where political parties contesting all (or the great majority of) constituencies dominate, however, the outcome in terms of the allocation of seats tends to be close to proportional representation, especially if only a few parties win substantial support among the electorate and the constituencies are not too small (returning c.5 MPs or less). Even so, as the attached copy of a paper appearing in *Representation* illustrates, it is possible to get substantial deviations from proportionality because of the ways in which one or more parties' votes are geographically distributed.

6. Party list systems are best able to produce proportional representation, especially if their constituencies are relatively large (c.10+ MPs per constituency), but they are unsatisfactory with regard to the criterion of maintaining links between MPs and constituencies.

7. Additional member systems (ams) provide a means of meeting both criteria, especially if the multi-member constituencies are relatively large, but they suffer the substantial disadvantage that only some MPs are elected to represent discrete

Defining constituencies under alternative electoral systems

12. We have recently completed a major study of the work of the Boundary Commissions, funded by the Leverhulme Trust: a book - *The Boundary Commissions: Redrawing the United Kingdom's Map of Parliamentary Constituencies* - resulting from this is to be published by Manchester University Press. Our major conclusions are that the rules under which the Commissions must operate are both vague and ambiguous, that there are inconsistencies in their implementation both between Commissions and in the work of individual Commissions, and that the very time-consuming process of public consultation is largely used by the political parties to promote their own electoral advantage, under the cloak of respect for such vague concepts as 'community of interest' and 'local ties'. Out of this we have developed proposals for an alternative set of rules: these were published in the journal *Renewal*, and a copy is attached. If implemented they would ensure that constituency-definition in the UK meets the following criteria:

- proportional representation from the UK's four constituent countries;
- fairness to individuals as the dominant criterion for defining constituencies throughout the UK; and
- the country's constituencies should as far as possible fit into its local government template, ensuring fair representation for communities.

13. Both of the alternative electoral systems that we consider meet the requirements set out in the Commission's terms of reference - stv and ams (with or without av for the single-member constituencies) - are constituency-based. We have proposed procedures for defining and reviewing constituencies for each of these systems that meet the three criteria set out in the previous paragraph. These are to be published in *Renewal*, and a copy is attached.

Conclusion

14. The Commission's terms of reference require it to propose an electoral system which produces a more proportional outcome than the current fptp system, thereby ensuring greater fairness to political parties than is currently the case. We have identified two electoral systems that can achieve this, and at the same time meet the other requirements set out in the terms of reference. Each of those systems requires a procedure for defining and reviewing constituencies.

15. The current UK system has such a procedure, which incorporates three other fairness criteria: to individuals, to communities, and to minorities. It is unsatisfactory, however, and we have made proposals for its improvement.

16. We believe that those three fairness criteria should remain salient in any new electoral system, which should embrace them plus the fourth on which the Commission is focusing - fairness to parties. We have proposed a procedure that will meet this desideratum.

Can We Ever Get Rid of Geography? Observations on the Possible Use of STV in United Kingdom General Elections

Ron Johnston, Charles Pattie and David Rossiter

In his argument that the first-past-the-post (fptp) electoral system is 'difficult to defend' Vernon Bogdanor presents geography (used in its vernacular sense rather than the academic discipline!) as a basic reason why that system fails to meet his two criteria for a democratic electoral system:¹ ensuring that the majority rules; and ensuring that all significant minorities are represented. The fptp system produces biased representation which favours two types of parties in the UK:

1. Those whose main appeal is to social classes which 'have not been distributed randomly but in concentrated pockets'; and
2. Those which represent 'geographically concentrated cultural and religious minorities'.

Thus he concludes, along with a growing collective wisdom of electoral analysts, that

...the number of seats which a party wins [under fptp] is dependent not only upon how many votes it wins but upon where those votes are cast. (p. 81)

Elsewhere, Bogdanor has argued not only for proportional representation but also for a particular electoral system - the single transferable vote (stv) - which both maximises individual choice and also, on the assumption that most people structure their votes along party lines rather than for individual candidates irrespective of party, produces an outcome consistent with

¹ V. Bogdanor, 'First-Past-The-Post: An Electoral System which is Difficult to Defend', *Representation*, 34:2 (1997), pp. 80-83.

For the purposes of defining Parliamentary constituencies, Wales is currently divided into eight counties - a situation which remains in place despite the recent local government reform.⁵

These return between two and seven members each. For our current purpose we operate with those eight, except that (Powys), which returns only two members, is combined with Dyfed, which returns five.

Votes and seats

The vote distributions for the seven 'county units' are given in Table 1. They show very considerable geographical variability in support for Labour and Plaid Cymru, and less so for Conservative and Liberal Democrat.

In Table 2 we suggest what seat allocations might result from these vote distributions. In the first block, we indicate each party's theoretical entitlement in the 'county units', derived simply by dividing its vote percentage by the Droop quota for the number of seats which the unit has been allocated. We then assume that all of the integer units will be won by the relevant parties on the basis that most voters allocate their highest preferences to candidates for the same party as that to which they gave their first preference: Conservatives get one seat in Clwyd, for example, and Labour three. At this stage, therefore, the Liberal Democrats have only one of the 30 seats allocated, despite winning 12.8 per cent of the votes, and Plaid Cymru has 2 seats with 10.3 per cent.

⁵ They are termed 'preserved counties' in the *Local Government (Wales) Act* of 1994; their 'creation' there followed arguments made by the Boundary Commission for Wales that the size of the new unitary authorities in Wales would make its task very difficult.

(fewer members; more voters per MP) that would result, we repeated the above exercise for 35 and 30 members representing Wales. The summaries are in Table 3. They show continued over-representation for Labour which is more substantial than is the case when 40 MPs are elected from Wales, and continued under-representation for Plaid Cymru. For the other two parties the 'largest remainder' allocation method always under-represents the Liberal Democrats, whereas they are over-represented with the 'simulated preferences method'. The Conservatives do relatively well under the 'largest remainder' procedure, but not under 'simulated preferences', largely because it is assumed that the party gets few second preference votes.

Conclusion

This short paper is not intended to provide a definitive statement regarding the possible outcome of an stv election in Wales, given the state of the parties there at the 1997 general election. It simply uses those data to illustrate a basic point that is largely missing from discussions of the possible interpretation of proportional representation for elections to the United Kingdom Parliament.

The figures that we have presented here do not dispute the general argument that stv produces a 'fairer' outcome than fptp in the allocation of seats relative to votes. The summary in Table 4 makes this clear: the very substantial over-representation of the Labour party under fptp on 1 May 1997 is considerably reduced, and the corresponding under-representation of the Conservative party ameliorated. But, whatever the size of the Welsh contingent in the House of Commons, Labour would probably be over-represented with that percentage of the votes,

General conclusions about which party will benefit and which will suffer in an stv election, relative to fptp, are not possible, therefore, because the outcome depends on the interactions among constituency size, the geography of each party's support, and the allocation of inter-party preferences. But there is no reason to believe that the pattern of votes and constituencies analysed here is a special case, and so we can conclude that the biases in the relationship between vote-winning and seat-allocation based on geography and normally associated with fptp are not particular to that electoral system: they are there, although in a less muted form, in stv as well. **Indeed, perhaps the only conclusion is simply that with any electoral system based on constituencies, you cannot get away from the effect of geography.**⁶

⁶ It is very likely, for example, that - given the 1997 distribution and geography of votes for each party - Plaid Cymru would be under-represented using the 'additional member' system proposed for the Welsh Assembly.

Table 2 Possible allocation of seats to the four parties in an stv election, using the percentages in Table 1

	Seats	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Plaid Cymru
<i>A Theoretical entitlement</i>					
Clwyd	6	1.92	3.89	0.77	0.42
Gwent	6	1.41	4.65	0.72	0.21
Gwynedd	4	0.98	1.58	0.66	1.78
Mid Glamorgan	7	0.88	5.67	0.78	0.66
South Glamorgan	5	1.68	3.29	0.81	0.20
West Glamorgan	5	0.89	4.07	0.67	0.36
Powys & Dyfed	7	1.74	3.22	1.60	1.44
<i>B Largest remainder allocation of remaining seats</i>					
Clwyd	6	1	1	0	0
Gwent	6	0	0	1	0
Gwynedd	4	1	0	0	1
Mid Glamorgan	7	1	0	1	0
South Glamorgan	5	0	0	1	0
West Glamorgan	5	1	0	0	0
Powys & Dyfed	7	1	0	0	0
<i>C Simulated preference distributions for allocation of remaining seats</i>					
Clwyd	6	0	1	1	0
Gwent	6	0	0	1	0
Gwynedd	4	1	0	0	1
Mid Glamorgan	7	0	1	0	0
South Glamorgan	5	0	0	1	0
West Glamorgan	5	1	0	0	0
Powys & Dyfed	7	0	0	1	0
TOTAL					
Largest remainder		9	24	4	3
(%)		22.5	60.0	10.0	7.5
Simulated preferences		6	25	6	3
(%)		15.0	62.5	15.0	7.5

Table 4 The possible impact of using stv in Wales: percentage of seats allocated to the parties based on the distribution of votes at the 1997 general election

	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Plaid Cymru
<i>Percentage of votes</i>				
	20.3	56.6	12.8	10.3
<i>1997 general election (fptp)</i>				
	0	85.0	5.0	10.0
<i>40 MPs elected by stv</i>				
largest remainder	22.5	60.0	10.0	7.5
simulated preferences	15.0	62.5	15.0	7.5
<i>35 MPs elected by stv</i>				
largest remainder	20.0	65.7	8.6	7.5
simulated preferences	11.4	62.9	14.3	11.4
<i>30 MPs elected by stv</i>				
largest remainder	23.3	66.7	1.3	6.7
simulated preferences	13.3	60.0	23.3	6.7