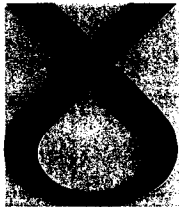


## Report of the Independent Commission on the Voting System: Volume 2

Submissions from political parties / fora

**Scottish National Party**



only  
44

**Best for Scotland**

SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY

INDEPENDENCE IN EUROPE

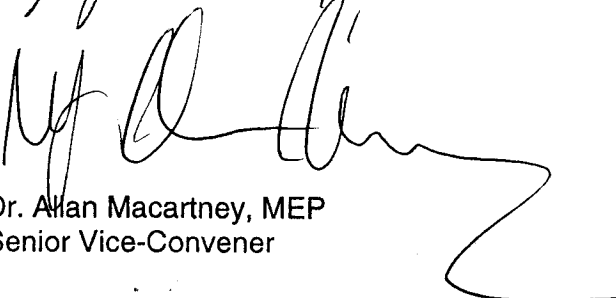
Rt. Hon. Lord Jenkins of Hillhead  
Chairman  
The Independent Commission  
on the Voting System  
6th Floor, Clive House  
Petty France  
London  
SW1H 9HD

March 27, 1998

*Dear Lord Jenkins,*

Please find enclosed herewith the written submission of the Scottish National Party to the Independent Commission on the Voting System, which follows on from the verbal comments submitted earlier this week during the public hearing in Edinburgh. I would draw your attention to the brief summary of its contents on page three.

I trust that you will find the SNP submission a constructive contribution to your work and wish the Commission well in its deliberations.

*Yours sincerely,*  


Dr. Allan Macartney, MEP  
Senior Vice-Convener

# **The Independent Commission on the Voting System**

## **Submission by the Scottish National Party**

### **A. PRINCIPLES**

1. **The Scottish National Party has long been committed to the principle of fairness as regards electoral systems and is thus strongly in favour of a system of Proportional Representation (PR) for Westminster elections.** Fairness has many aspects, including equal access to the electorate (via both free mailings and the mass media) and a ceiling on expenditure by and on behalf of political parties. But above all it requires a correspondence between the views of the voters and the legislature they elect. Proportional representation in its various forms seeks to achieve that.
2. The current British "First Past the Post" (FPTP) system manifestly fails the fairness test since there has not been a majority Government since World War II, all governments having been elected by a minority of the votes cast in a General Election. FPTP does not even guarantee the success of the largest minority, since on two occasions (1951 and February 1974) the winning side had polled fewer votes than the losing side.
3. In Scotland the distorting effects of First Past the Post can be seen *par excellence*. Two examples bear this out with particularly stark clarity, the elections to the European Parliament in 1989 and the British General Election of 1997. In the former, Labour won seven of the eight seats with less than half the votes; in the latter, the score for the Conservatives, notwithstanding the support of approximately one vote in five, was 0 out of 72. The other side of the coin was that in 1997 Labour yet again won a crushing majority of seats on a minority of the votes. That is not democracy.
4. The Scottish Electorate will be faced with the challenge of a new voting system in May 1999, when they will be placing their crosses next to their preferred party as well as their preferred constituency candidate. In June they will join the rest of the UK in voting for closed regional lists for the European Parliament. Scotland will be perfectly prepared for a new voting system for the Westminster Parliament. By conserving FPTP, Westminster would only confirm its reputation as a dinosaur among modern democracies.
5. There are however considerations apart from pure proportionality based on party preference. A good example of the political deficiencies of a system which is concerned only with proportionality is provided by the electoral systems employed in France for elections to the European Parliament. The voters are

faced with an all-France list and it is perfectly possible that the contingent from France in the European Parliament might not contain a single Breton or Corsican. Likewise the same system used in the Netherlands could leave the Frisians unrepresented. The point made here is that territorial representation is an important element in ensuring a fair democratic outcome.

6. Thus the ideal system must include both elements: proportionality and territoriality.

## **B. PROPOSALS**

7. The SNP favours the Alternative Vote (AV) system for the election of constituency members (two-thirds of the entire House) combined with the Additional Member System (AMS) which would provide a third of the overall number of members.
8. The rationale behind our policy on electoral reform is to achieve as nearly as possible proportional representation of parties within the parliament while still retaining the member-constituency link in single member seats.
9. The Scottish National Party considers the link between members and their constituencies to be of great importance. Members of Parliament have a responsibility to reflect the particular concerns of their constituents, and consequently to focus their energies on matters of importance in their own geographic region. At the same time, with the constituency link the voters have a clear channel through which to address their concerns. The elected individuals will be directly accountable to the voters in their area, and equally will have a clear mandate to represent them.
10. AV ensures that the candidate elected must have secured an absolute majority. The voter is required to rank the various candidates in order of preference, and if no candidate secures an absolute majority at the first count the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and his or her second preference votes are redistributed among the others. If there is still no absolute majority, the next lowest candidate is eliminated and his or her second preference votes redistributed, and so on until an overall winner is found.
11. The AV system addresses the problem that under First Past the Post candidates with minority support may win seats. MPs can clearly claim, with justice, properly to represent their constituency if they are returned by AV. It is accordingly a major improvement for constituency democracy on FPTP and should therefore be welcomed. Paradoxically, however, the cumulative effect of AV does not necessarily add up to proportionality for the legislature on a whole.

It is therefore necessary to add a corrective element and this is where the Additional Member System comes in.

12. A further advantage of AMS is that it can operate in such a way as to allow for the correction, by the parties, of imbalances that may turn out to have occurred in elections to the constituency seats. In particular it allows the correction of underrepresentation of such categories as gender, geography and ethnic origin.

### **C. SUMMARY**

13. The Scottish National Party:

- a) believes that fairness in electoral systems demands a form of proportional representation.
- b) stresses the importance of maintaining the territorial constituency link.
- c) believes that the optimum system is a combination of the Alternative Vote (AV) with the Additional Member System (AMS).
- d) strongly favours PR for Westminster elections.

Dr Allan Macartney MEP  
Senior Vice-Convener  
on behalf of the Scottish National Party

March 1998