

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

Submissions and correspondence from Members of Parliament

Martin Linton MP

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

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Saturday February 28<sup>th</sup> 1998

Dear Lord Jenkins

I enclose a submission to your Commons on the Voting System.

If you feel it would be useful, I should be delighted to come and discuss these ideas in greater detail.

I am one of the authors of a booklet on the voting system, Labour's Road to Electoral Reform What's Wrong with First-past-the-post?, and a book that will be published later in the spring, Making Votes Count: the case for Electoral Reform.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Martin Linton'.

**Martin Linton MP**

LABOUR MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT FOR BATTERSEA

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

# **A SYSTEM FOR THE FUTURE**

*From Martin Linton*

*MP for Battersea and author of Labour's Road to Electoral Reform*

YOUR terms of reference start by saying that you should be “free to consider and recommend any appropriate system or combination of systems”, but go on to set out four different criteria that a new voting system should observe. They are:

1. *the requirement for broad proportionality,*
2. *the need for stable government,*
3. *an extension of voter choice and*
4. *the maintenance of the link between members and geographical constituencies*

You will not need your witnesses to tell you that the Government has set you a puzzle to which there may be no answer. The four criteria are not necessarily compatible and they certainly pull in different directions.

The ‘*requirement for broad proportionality*’ seems to be saying that you should only consider proportional systems, which would restrict your choice to *ams*, *stv* or the *list* system, though even *stv* is not always proportional, as you will know from the simulation of the last election using different voting systems carried out by Democratic Audit.

The ‘*need for stable government*’ begs a question. Does a stable government mean a majority government? Coalition governments can be very stable, but it seems likely that the Government was really talking about majority governments and it is difficult to deny that majority governments are going to be, as a generalisation, more stable than coalition governments.

If they did mean majority governments, then the systems most likely to deliver them are generally reckoned to be *fptp* and *av*, though majority governments can of course be elected under any system. Sweden has enjoyed decades of one-party (though usually not quite majority) government on a highly proportional regional list system. Spain and Greece have elected majority governments throughout the 1970s and 1980s on regional list systems. It should be noted, however, that Greece’s system, sometimes described as a ‘*reinforced list system*’, has applied a very high threshold, requiring parties to win at one stage 17 and at another stage 25 per cent of the vote before they win any seats. Spain’s regional list system is divided into relatively small regions with no national top-up so that small parties find it difficult to win seats.

The list system that is being adopted for the European elections in Britain will have the same tendency. According to projections by John Curtice and Martin Range<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A Flawed Revolution? Britain’s new European Parliament electoral system, by John Curtice and Martin Range

Labour will win 51 per cent of the seats if it matches the 44 per cent of the vote it won in the last European elections in 1994. If the system was used in a general election, it would produce less distortion because of the finer granularity created by a larger number of seats, but it would not be true, as many critics have assumed, that a party would need as much as 50 per cent of the vote to win a majority of the seats.

If you interpret a '*need for stable government*' as a bias towards majority government, there are a number of things you can do:

- 1) High thresholds. In evidence to the Plant Committee I argued for an *ams* system that awarded additional seats only to parties that had already won a constituency seat. This would protect the position of regionalist and nationalist parties, but would not open the gates to a lot of small extremist or 'pressure group' parties that cannot win seats under the present system.
- 2) Smaller regions. If a list system is chosen, an effective threshold will be set by the number of seats in each region. That will be clear in the European elections where the North-East with four seats will have an effective threshold of 20 per cent. A list system based on counties rather than regions would have the same effect in Westminster elections.
- 3) Highest averages. Counting systems have only the most marginal effect on most election results where a *list* system or *ams* is used, but when there are relatively small regions with no national top-up they can become significant. The Curtice projections would award Labour an overall majority with 43 out of 84 seats under the highest average system (d'Hondt), but the party would fall short of a majority with 41 seats under the largest remainder system and 40 under the rounding system (Sainte Lague).

There is no mathematically correct system, but the system that comes closest to most people's sense of fairness is the system of highest averages. It means that if Party A wins more than twice as many votes as party B, it should get twice as many seats. The Sainte Lague system has the effect of rescuing small parties below the threshold by rounding their score up, for instance from 17 to 20, and pays for it by rounding larger parties down, for instance from 44 to 40. It wins a higher score on the proportionality index only because it awards seats to small parties that would otherwise fall below the threshold and win no seats at all. The largest remainder system means that percentages are rounded up but not down, giving it an effect midway between d'Hondt and Ste Lague.

But these issues will have only a marginal effect. There is a basic tension between the principles of proportionality and stable government which can only be resolved when we have settled more fundamental questions about what elections are for. I will return to this later.

The '*maintenance of a link between members and geographical constituencies*' limits the choice to a constituency-based system. This presumably excludes any *list* system. It does not formally exclude *stv* which is based on multi-member constituencies, though they would have to be much larger than the constituencies we are used to. Nor does it specify a constituency-*only* system, so that still leaves the door open for *ams* which would usually have between a half and three quarters of MPs representing

constituencies. But if the link is taken to mean a constituency-only single-member system where all MPs represent a single constituency, then the only options are *fptp* and *av*.

By the time of the referendum there will be first-hand experience of *ams* in the elections to the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly in May 1999. In the Scottish version just over half the MPs (57 per cent) will represent constituencies and in the Welsh Assembly two-thirds will represent constituencies. But neither of these will involve an increase in the size of existing constituencies.

An '*extension of voter choice*' is the least explicit of the four criteria. Voter choice could be extended in many different directions. But let us assume that they are referring to what are generally seen as the main failings of the *fptp* system. They are the problems of *wasted votes* and of *tactical voting*. These are quite separate phenomena and require different solutions. I use the term *wasted votes* to refer to the fact that only about a third of votes in a general election make any difference to the result. In an article entitled '*Votes that Count and Votes that Don't*' Ron Johnston, Charles Pattie and David Rossiter make the distinction between effective, wasted and surplus votes. Less than a third of votes in the 1997 election were effective (ie necessary in order to elect the winner), while two thirds were either wasted (cast for defeated candidates) or surplus (just swelling the size of the winner's majority). In most other voting systems, including *ams*, *list* and *stv*, these votes are put towards the election of another MP, ensuring that very few votes are wasted and nearly everyone is represented by an MP for whom they voted.

In nearly every other European country voters have the satisfaction of knowing that, unless they vote for a very small party, their vote counts towards the election of an MP of their party. There will be an MP of their party whom they voted for and who is accountable to them. But in the UK most people go to the polling station knowing that their individual vote is highly unlikely to make a difference. Only a third of votes are effective (in counting towards the result) and only about 90 constituencies (out of 659) are marginal and therefore likely to affect the result.

*Tactical voting* arises because people are asked to exercise a choice in one round of voting that normally requires an eliminating ballot. Any member of a club or society knows you cannot have a fair election contest between three candidates in a single ballot, any more than you can toss a coin between three. But if people are forced to use such an inappropriate voting system they need to guess who the two main contenders will be and make a choice between them. Since the 1950s there has been a huge shift towards tactical voting and tactical resourcing of election campaigns by the political parties that has had a deeply distortive effect on voting behaviour and indeed on the behaviour of politicians.

But tactical voting is a problem that is unique to *fptp*. It would be unnecessary under any other system. There are two ways of making it unnecessary. First, one can adopt a preferential voting system, such as *av*, *sv* or the *double ballot*, which allows the voter to express a second choice. Secondly, one can adopt a proportional system, such as *ams* or *list*, where wasted or surplus votes will be passed on to the next candidate of the same party, or *stv*, where unused votes will be passed on to the next candidate indicated by the voter.

So, in summary, if we look at the four criteria in the Commission's terms of reference, *proportionality*, *stable government*, *the constituency link* and *the extension of voters' choice*, and we interpret the last as a need to eliminate the problems of *wasted votes* and *tactical voting*, then we can see that, on a simplistic level, there is only one answer to the question that the Commission has been asked to investigate. *Fptp* meets only two of the five criteria and is thus the least suitable system; *av* is an improvement, but still meets only three of the criteria; *stv* and the *regional list* do not have the link between a constituency and a single MP and can but often don't produce stable government; only *ams* could potentially satisfy all the criteria, and then only if it was suitably reinforced to increase the probability of majority governments.

Table 1: Voting systems and criteria

	fptp	av	Stv	ams	list
proportionality	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
stable government	Yes	Yes	Yes if	Yes if	Yes if
constituency link	Yes	Yes	No*	Yes	No
extending choice: tactical voting	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
extending choice: wasted votes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
score	2	3	3-4	4-5	3-4

• Under *STV* MPs will have a constituency link but with multi-member constituencies

So we could leave it there and declare *ams* the clear winner on points. But *ams* is still flawed in many politicians' eyes because they want a majority government and they fear that *ams* will lead to permanent coalition. They will cite the evidence of Germany, which has had *ams* since the war and has had coalition governments for nearly all of that time. They will particularly point to the rôle of the German Liberal Party, the FDP, which has won only two constituency seats in all of that time but has won sufficient additional seats under the *ams* system to hold the balance of power and sometimes to decide whether the Christian Democrats or the Social Democrats should take power.

Nowadays they will also point to the experience in New Zealand which adopted a variant of *ams* called the Mixed Member Proportional system and found itself without a government for a month after the election. Eventually the small New Zealand First party, which had campaigned as an opponent of the right-wing National Party, switched sides and entered a coalition with them, apparently confirming the warnings of the system's opponents that it would give the power of king-maker to small parties.

Whatever proportional system the Commission recommends, there can be no doubt that the campaign against change in the referendum will concentrate on the issue of government. A proportional system, they will argue, may give people a wider choice of parties but will give them less say in the choice of government. It may give smaller parties more proportionate representation but it will give them disproportionate power as balance-holders and king-makers in a more fractured party system.

To answer this we need to consider a very basic question about what people are trying to achieve when they vote. In general elections they are exercising three distinct choices. They are choosing an MP to represent the interests of their area, electing a

parliament to reflect the diversity of the nation and picking a government to run the country for the next five years. In the UK we try to make all three choices through a single vote. We do this through a very imperfect voting system that has remained almost unchanged since the first parliament in 1265. It evolved as a way of choosing territorial representatives at a time when governments and political parties did not even exist. Yet we now expect this voting system to accomplish tasks for which it was never designed.

In some countries these tasks have been separated. In Germany, for instance, you get two votes, one for an MP, another for a party. You can, if you wish, vote for a local MP of one party and then vote for a different party in the Bundestag. Your first vote will help to elect your MP but only your second vote will determine the balance of parties in the Bundestag. In other countries you have two votes, one for the legislature, one for the executive. In the United States, for instance, you vote separately for your congressman and for the president. The same applies in France where you also have two votes, one for your MP and the other for the president. The president then appoints a prime minister. In both countries it can result in a president and parliament of different parties. The Americans make a virtue of this, calling it the separation of powers. The French solve the problem by expecting a president of one party to 'cohabit' if necessary with a prime minister of another.

We roll these three choices into one in a way that gives the voters only the most indirect control over the executive. The first stage is that we elect MPs. The second stage is that MPs take a party whip. The third stage is that the MPs vote, if necessary, to decide which party leader should be the prime minister. The last time that MPs actually had to vote on who should be Prime Minister was in January 1924. But it is still a three-stage process of electing MPs, who form parties, who form governments, a bit like pushing a stick with a stick with a stick. In practice the voters tend to short-circuit this process by choosing their MPs not for their intrinsic qualities as public representatives, but on the basis of their party labels. Sometimes they choose parties, not on their intrinsic merits, but as an indirect way of choosing a government.

Our voting system concentrates exclusively on the first stage, the election of MPs. Proportional systems, such as *stv*, *ams* and *list*, are looking primarily at the second stage, the election of parties. Presidential systems are looking directly at the third stage, the election of the executive. And it is to a large extent the different nature of these choices that determines which system is used. Voting for a local MP, at least in a single-member constituency, is a definitive choice. There is only one position to be filled and that can only be done through a majoritarian system, such as *fptp* or *av*. Voting for a party is an indefinite choice. One can vote for any number of parties in any proportions. That can only be done fairly through a proportional system, such as *ams*, *stv* or *list*. But voting for a government is more of a definitive choice. It usually boils down to a choice between two and that again needs a majoritarian system, such as *fptp* or *av*.

It is possible to devise a voting system that allows the voter to choose MP, party and government at the same time. It would need to use a preferential system to elect the local MP, a proportional system to elect parties to Parliament and a preferential system to decide which party should form the government. The voting system would then have to reconcile the three choices. *Ams* can be used to reconcile the first two,

electing most of the MPs in constituencies on a preferential 1-2-3 basis and the rest in regions by a *list* system, but in a way that aims at overall proportionality. Another version of *ams*, perhaps *ams-plus*, could allow the voters to decide which party should form the government, again on a preferential 1-2-3 basis. If the most recent election the Labour Party received 44 per cent of the (first-preference) votes. If it picked up another 7 per cent from the second preferences of Liberal Democrat voters, it would then have more than 50 per cent and be guaranteed a working majority in the Commons. The additional seats would thus serve two functions - to bring the overall strength of the parties closer to proportionality and to ensure that there is a working majority for the elected government.

This may be a new system, but the election of a Mayor of London and a Greater London Authority, probably in May 2000, is likely to combine a preferential system for the election of the mayor and an *ams* system for the election of a Greater London Authority, giving Londoners a choice of local representative, party and executive, all on the same ballot paper. This will provide a test run for this kind of election.

If it works, it will be a uniquely British compromise, meeting all the Commission's principles of broad proportionality, stable government and the constituency link. At the end of the day the choice is likely to be determined by prosaic considerations. *Av* is the only new system that could be introduced without a change in constituency boundaries. The problem for both *ams* and *stv* is that they would require boundary commissions to sit and report before implementation. This is unrealistic before a 2002 general election. A new hybrid is being canvassed of *av plus* which is *av* topped up by *ams*. This has the intriguing possibility that it could be put on the referendum ballot paper to be implemented in two stages. We would use *av* for the next election but a positive referendum result would put the next government under a moral obligation to hold boundary commissions so that the following general election would be held under *ams* or *ams-plus*. A truly British compromise of a mixed system reached in two stages.

**Martin Linton MP**





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*Dear Lord Alexander*

**Re: Supplementary evidence**

I attach a copy of some supplementary evidence I have submitted in response to an enquiry from David Lipsey. I only hope it arrives in time to influence your deliberations.

Yours truly,

*Martin Linton*

**Martin Linton MP**

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## **VOTING FOR A GOVERNMENT**

*from Martin Linton, MP for Battersea*

In my earlier evidence I wrote that: "*it is possible to devise a voting system that allows the voter to choose MP, party and government at the same time*" and I have been asked to elaborate. I'm glad of the opportunity because I think the question of the voters' control over the choice of government could become central in the debate on voting systems that will follow the publication of your recommendations.

I start from the observation that when we vote in general elections we are trying to exercise three choices through a single vote. We are electing an MP to represent the interests of an area, a parliament to reflect the diversity of the nation and a government to run the country. In our voting system we roll all three choices into one in a way that causes the voters endless dilemmas. What do they do if their party's candidate stands no chance in their constituency? Or if they support a party that stands no chance of forming a government? Do they vote for the party or the candidate or the government?

We don't have to give ourselves these dilemmas. Many countries break the choice down into its constituent parts. All countries that use *ams*, including Germany, Italy and several East European counties, give people two votes, one for their local MP, one for their party. All countries that have presidential systems, such as the United States, France and several other European countries, give people two or more votes, one for the legislature, one for the executive. Countries that have directly-elected mayors also give people dual votes, one for the mayor and one for the council.

We have no experience of dual votes in this country, but we soon will. In 1999 Scottish and Welsh voters will be faced with a two-part ballot paper, one for a local representative, one for a party. In the following year Londoners will be faced with a three-part ballot paper in the first elections for the Greater London Authority. They will vote for local representatives (by first-past-the-post), for additional members (by the list system) and for a Mayor of London (by supplementary vote). This is not as daunting as it sounds. I attach a ballot paper (Annex 1) of a kind that could be used.

It is often assumed that, as a result of the Scottish, Welsh, European and London elections, people will be more receptive to, or at least more used to all the various forms of proportional representation by the time of the referendum on voting systems. But while the elections to the London Assembly will be held on a proportional system, the mayoral election will see the introduction of a completely different system, much closer to the mayoral or presidential elections of the US and France, and it is far too early to say whether the voters will be more impressed by the system that elects the Scottish First Minister or the London Mayor.

There will be three features of the system for electing the London Mayor that will be completely new to this country:

- 1) it will be the first *preferential* election that allows voters to exercise not just a first but also a second choice
- 2) it will be first *executive* election that gives voters a direct say over the person and not just the institution that governs them
- 3) it will be the first *definitive* election that is guaranteed not to end in stalemate like a hung council or a hung parliament

This last feature may make it an attractive system to those whose views about *pr* are based largely on the fear that it can lead to permanent coalition and disproportionate power for small centre parties which hold the balance of power. If the London election is successful, they may say: if people can elect a mayor, why can't they elect a prime minister? If the main purpose of an election is to choose a government, why can't the voters choose one directly?

With this in mind I have devised a system that allows the voter to express a choice on all three aspects of a general election at the same time. The ballot paper (Annex 2) looks very similar to the ballot paper for London and gives the electors three votes, one for a local MP, one for a political party and one for a government. Essentially, it is an additional member system with an extra vote for government and could perhaps best be described as *ams-plus*.

### **How the system would work**

I will first describe the ballot paper, then the allocation of seats and the rules.

**Ballot 1:** The first ballot elects MPs for the constituency seats, which would be half the seats in parliament. They would be elected by the supplementary vote. Voters would mark an 'x' for their first choice and another 'x' for their second.

**Ballot 2:** The second ballot elects MPs for the additional seats. Voters would make a single 'x' for a party in the same way as in the European elections. That would count towards the election of a party list printed on the ballot paper.

**Ballot 3:** The third ballot gives people a chance to choose the government or prime minister. That would again be done by the supplementary vote. Voters would mark an 'x' for their first choice and another 'x' for their second.

The results of the first ballot would be declared at local constituency counts, as at present, but the results of the second ballot would be sent through to regional counts and the results of the third ballot would go through to a national count for the UK.

**Allocation 1:** The existing 659 seats would be paired to form new seats and these 330 seats would be allocated on the basis of the supplementary vote at local counts.

**Allocation 2:** The national count would come next to ascertain whether either of the two leading parties would win more than 50 % when their 2<sup>nd</sup> choices were included. If a party won 52 %, for instance, it would be allocated enough of the remaining 329 seats to give it 52 % of the seats.

**Allocation 3:** The regional counts would then allocate the rest of the seats so as to bring the parties' shares of the seats as close as possible to their share of the vote. But parties would only qualify for additional seats if they had won a constituency seat.

The same parties will not necessarily appear on all three parts of the ballot paper because the qualifying conditions will be more exacting at the higher levels:

**Level 1:** As now, any candidate will be able to stand in a constituency seat as long as they are nominated by a minimum number of electors and they pay a deposit. The deposit could remain at £500 but the required number should be increased from 12 to well over 100, maybe half a per cent of the electorate.

**Level 2:** At regional level parties will only be able to put up lists if they are running candidates in at least half the constituencies in that region.

**Level 3:** At national level parties will only appear on the ballot for government if they have put up lists in at least half the regions.

The purpose would be to deter joke parties or publicity seekers from standing in constituencies, to deter all but the serious regional or national parties from putting up party lists and to deter all but the serious national parties from appearing on the ballot for government. In total, they would need more than 100,000 nominations across the country to meet the qualifying conditions.

### **Why the extra seats?**

It is one of the more controversial aspects of *first-past-the-post* that it has an exaggerative effect. Winning parties win more than their fair share of seats and losing parties, by and large, win less. Some people regard it as the main unfairness in the system – that it under-represents small parties. Others regard it as the main advantage of the system – that it gives the leading party an overall majority with which to govern.

Reformers tend to come into the first category. They are more concerned about the fairness and proportionality of voting systems. But many politicians, probably including the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary in this instance, come into the second category. They are more concerned about the ability of the government to govern. Although I would class myself as a reformer, I think there is a good case for giving the leading party a 'winner's bonus' so that it can – if it really is the preferred government – rule without having to form coalitions.

I offer two justifications for this. One is empirical. Nearly every country that operates a 'proportional representation' system has adopted some kind of device to make the system less proportional. Every country has a threshold below which parties do not qualify for seats. Some countries use small regions which also work as a filter to stop small parties. The effect is to boost the representation of big parties and to create some degree of 'winner's bonus'. The reason is clear: pure proportional representation is very difficult to manage. Even Israel, which used to have the purest proportional system in the world, has recently increased its threshold and introduced a ballot for prime minister.

The second reason is theoretical. It has to do with the nature of choice. If you are trying to elect a parliament that is a microcosm of the nation, that reflects its diversity, the voters need to be given as wide a choice as possible. But if you are trying to elect a government that can act decisively, then the voters need to focus on the real alternatives, the effective contenders for power. One requires an open-ended choice; the other a heads-or-tails choice. One a full palette of colour; the other only black and white.

*Proportional representation* offers voters an open-ended choice. *First-past-the-post* is often held up as a definitive system. But it is not. Even if it benefits leading parties, it still offers an open-ended choice. The only systems that are definitive – and therefore also coalition-proof – are preferential systems. That is how the French presidential and mayoral elections work. They identify the two front runners and then they hold a run-off between them. They force people to make a hard choice and that involves looking into their second preferences.

It is rare under either system for a party to win an absolute majority of votes and therefore to have an indisputable claim to government. Although it was common in this country in the last century, there has hardly been a single case this century of a party winning an absolute majority of votes. The Liberal landslide of 1906, Labour's post-war victory in 1945, Margaret Thatcher's overwhelming victory in 1983, Tony Blair's in 1997, all fell short, in some case well short, of an absolute majority. The last time a party won over 50 % of the vote was under the very unusual circumstances of the National Government in 1931 and 1935<sup>1</sup>. The previous occasion was in 1900.

It has been just a rare in the countries with *proportional representation*. Since the war there have been about 200 parliamentary elections held under various forms of *pr* in European democracies and only nine times has a single party won a majority of seats and votes. It happened three times in Austria (the Socialists had more than 50 per cent of votes and seats in three successive elections in the 1970s), twice in Portugal, once in Ireland, once in Greece and once in Germany if you count the CDU-CSU as a single party. Even in Sweden, where the Social Democrats have been the sole party in government for a total of 36 years, they have won an absolute majority of seats and votes in only one post-war election, 1968.<sup>2</sup>

The reason lies in the nature of choice. If you offer people a choice of two, one must inevitably be chosen by more than 50 % of those who express a choice. If you offer a choice of three or four or five, that is far less likely to happen. French presidents are always supported by more than 50 % of French voters. No British prime minister has had the support of more than 44 % of British voters for quarter of a century. But that does not mean Mitterrand was more popular than Thatcher or that Chirac has more legitimacy than Blair. If you look at the first-round votes for Mitterrand, he was in

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<sup>1</sup> In 1931 the Conservatives won 55.5%. In 1935 the Conservatives won 48.1% and the National Liberals 6.7%.

<sup>2</sup> This covers democratic elections in the period 1945-1994 in 16 European countries (excluding Malta). The parties are the Austrian Socialist Party, Portuguese Social Democrats, Portuguese Socialist Party, Fianna Fail, New Democracy, CDU-CSU and the Swedish Social Democrats. If Malta is included, both the Labour Party and the National Party have twice won a majority of seats and votes.

fact elected by fewer votes than Thatcher.<sup>3</sup> French presidential elections give the victor the legitimacy of being supported by more than half the voters only because they are preferential.

One can only course say that if a particular party is popular enough, it will get a majority. One can point to long periods in particular countries when parties have been elected and re-elected by absolute majorities. The Whigs in early 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain are an example. In the US the Democratic Party won an absolute majority of votes and seats in every Congressional election from 1952 to 1994. In Malta the last five elections have been won by absolute majorities. But once these hegemonic periods end, the voters get used to exercising a wider choice and the process is unlikely to go into reverse.

It is not true that proportional representation always leads to coalition government. There are several countries that have had long periods of single-party majority government elected by proportional representation, e.g. Austria, Greece and Spain. But while the Austrian system is very proportional, and there have only been majority governments when there has been majority support for them, the same cannot be said of Greece and Spain. In fact the Greek system has been deliberately designed so that a party that wins by a plurality will generally have a majority in their parliament. They call it 'reinforced proportional representation' and it works through a series of thresholds at local, regional and national level that keep small parties out and award a 'winner's bonus' to the party that wins the national vote. These thresholds are frequently changed. They have been as high as 17 and 25 per cent.

Since the end of the colonels' regime Greece has alternated between New Democracy and Pasok majority rule, but only one government – the first – was based on a majority vote. Pasok's victories in the 1980s both depended on the 'reinforcement' in the system. In 1981 it won 48 % of the vote and 57 % of the seats; in 1985 it was 46 % of the vote and 54 % of the seats. A change in the system left New Democracy with exactly 50 % of the seats for 46.9 % of the vote in 1990, so they changed the system back. Ironically, it helped Pasok who won the 1993 election by the same percentage of the vote, 46.9 %, but won 57 % of the seats. In effect the system gives a winner's bonus of 7-10 %.

The long hegemony of Felipe Gonzalez Socialist Party in Spain owed a lot to a system that gave them a winner's bonus. Instead of being based on the Spanish regions, it is based on 50 provinces, many of them so small that they return only three or four MPs. This creates high thresholds and usually ensures that the seats are divided by the two biggest parties, the Socialists and the Popular Alliance. This helped the Socialists to win 58 % of the seats on 48 % of the vote in 1982, 53 % of the seats on 44 % of the vote in 1986 and 50 % of the seats on 39.6 % of the vote in 1991.

This last result was almost identical to Harold Wilson's victory in October 1974 when he won 50.2 % of the seats for 39.2 % of the vote. From this it can be seen that the Spanish system delivers a winner's bonus of a similar size to Britain's. I point this

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<sup>3</sup> Mitterrand won only 26 % and 34 % in his first round elections in 1981 and 1988, but 52 % and 54 % in the second rounds.

out not as a criticism of Spain but to demonstrate that it is not a straight choice between coalition-prone proportional representation and coalition-proof first-past-the-post. Our own system can be very coalition-prone, as was clearly demonstrated by local election results in the mid-1980s when a majority of counties were 'hung', and proportional representation can be 'reinforced' to make it coalition-proof.

It is only if we can detach the arguments about proportional representation from the arguments about the desirability or undesirability of coalition government that we have any chance of debating the real merits of *pr* for the individual voter – that it makes votes effective, wherever you live, that it removes the need for tactical voting, that it gives you more control over the political system.

### **What would have happened**

The system I propose is not entirely coalition-proof. It could easily be made so, but I do not think it would be fair to force majority government on the voter whether they want it or not. I have asked the Statistical Section of the House of Commons Library to make some calculations of how this system would work in practice. They have reworked the results of the last four elections using the second preferences either from the British Election Study or from the post-election surveys conducted by ICM for Democratic Audit.

If we look at the most recent election in May 1997, Table 1 shows that this system would have given Labour an overall majority. It would not be as large as the majority of 179 it won under first-past-the-post. But it would be a substantial majority of 85 and it would be built on the solid foundations of the expressed preferences of voters instead of the arbitrary vagaries of the first-past-the-post system. Under the first allocation of constituency seats, Labour would have won 218, doing slightly better than it did in the actual election because of the operation of the supplementary vote. In addition to its 43 per cent of the first preference votes it would have won the majority of the second preferences of Liberal Democrat and nationalist voters, taking its overall share of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> preference votes to 56 per cent. It would thus qualify for a winner's bonus of an additional 154 seats to take its total to 372.

On these second preferences the Conservatives would have ended up with exactly the same number of seats, 165, while the Liberal Democrats would have had 90 instead of 46. The nationalist parties (in Scotland and Wales) would have done slightly better with 13 seats instead of ten. On an alternative set of second preferences from Democratic Audit the figures would have been Labour 356, Conservative 175, LibDem 95, nationalist parties 14.

Neither survey covered Northern Ireland so no account is taken of second preferences in the province. But an alternative calculation was made assuming that half the Unionist votes named the Conservatives as their second preference and half the nationalist voters named Labour. This made only a slight difference, increasing Labour's seats from 372 to 375 or, on Democratic Audit figures, from 356 to 360.

As Table 3 shows, the small difference between the British Election Survey and Democratic Audit figures would have been enough to make the difference in 1992 between John Major winning 50.2 % - and therefore getting a winner's bonus – or

getting 49.4 per cent and therefore failing to win it. If he had fallen short, he would have been left just the 42 % of seats that his popular vote would entitle him to. The result would have been a 'hung' parliament, but that would have reflected a truth – that most people did not want a Conservative government.

However, Lady Thatcher would have won a majority in both 1983 and 1987 – not as large as the majority she won under first-past-the-post, but nevertheless a majority that would answer her critics who claimed that she never commanded the support of a majority of the voters. While she always welcomed a large majority, some Conservatives would have regarded a smaller majority as a small price to pay for the increased legitimacy that a clear victory would have given her government.

### **The Israeli experiment**

The Israelis introduced a vote for prime minister at their last election in 1996 which has often been described as 'a disaster'. It certainly had the consequence that Shimon Peres was marginally but incontestably defeated by Benjamin Netanyahu (by 50.5 to 49.5%) whereas it is only likely but not certain that his Labour Party would have been forced out of government on the parliamentary elections alone. But there are two important differences between the Israeli system and what is proposed here. The Israeli system has a very low threshold, increased in 1992, but only to 1.5 %. The paradoxical result of the introduction of the vote for prime minister in 1996, which was intended to focus people's minds of the main battle between Labour and Likud, was that it guaranteed that either Peres or Netanyahu would be elected so it released voters from the need to vote for them. Support for small parties actually went up instead of down. Both Labour and Likud lost support, Labour 10 %, Likud 8 %. The vote for prime minister unstuck the glue that held the system together which was that people were mainly concerned about which government was elected. Once they did not have to worry about that, many felt able to indulge their support for a small party.

The system proposed here would retain constituencies and impose a high threshold against small parties by insisting that a party must win a constituency seat before it can benefit from the distribution of alternative seats. It has a vote for government, similar to the Israeli vote for prime minister, but the Israeli system includes no mechanism for ensuring that the party elected to government has a majority to rule with. This system, by contrast, would deliver not only the title of government but an overall majority to the winning party.

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# Annex 1: London ballot paper

## Vote for a local representative

Your vote will elect a member of the Greater London Authority to represent your area, Lambeth and Wandsworth

<i>Put an 'x' for the candidate you support</i>	
BROWN, NIGEL Conservative Party	
EVANS, RAYMOND Labour Party	
JONES, ELIZABETH Liberal Democrats	
SMITH, ANGELA Independent	

## Vote for additional members

Your vote will elect additional members of the Greater London Authority from lists submitted by the parties or independents shown on the reverse

<i>Put an 'x' for the party list or independent you support</i>	
Conservative Party	
Green Party	
Independent	
Labour Party	
Liberal Democrats	

## Vote for a Mayor of London

Your vote will elect a Mayor of London

<i>Put an 'x' for your 1<sup>st</sup> and another 'x' for your 2<sup>nd</sup> choice</i>	<i>1<sup>st</sup></i>	<i>2<sup>nd</sup></i>
JEFFREY ARCHER, Independent candidate		
RICHARD BRANSON, Independent candidate		
SIMON HUGHES, Liberal Democrat		
STEVE NORRIS, Conservative candidate		
NICK RAYNSFORD, Labour candidate		

## Annex 2: Ams-plus ballot paper

### Vote for a local MP

Your vote will decide the MP for your constituency

<i>Put an 'x' for your 1<sup>st</sup> and another 'x' for your 2<sup>nd</sup> choice</i>	<i>1<sup>st</sup></i>	<i>2<sup>nd</sup></i>
BROWN, NIGEL Conservative Party		
EVANS, RAYMOND Labour Party		
JONES, ELIZABETH Liberal Democrats		
SMITH, ANGELA Independent		

### Vote for a political party

Your vote will affect the overall number of MPs from each party

<i>Put an 'x' for the party you support</i>	
Conservative Party	
Green Party	
Labour Party	
Liberal Democrats	
Plaid Cymru	
Scottish National Party	

### Vote for a government

Your vote will decide who forms a government. If any party wins a majority of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> choice votes, it will win a majority of the seats in the Commons.

<i>Put an 'x' for your 1<sup>st</sup> and another 'x' for your 2<sup>nd</sup> choice</i>	<i>1<sup>st</sup></i>	<i>2<sup>nd</sup></i>
The Liberal Democrats, led by Paddy Ashdown		
The Labour Party, led by Tony Blair		
The Conservative Party, led by William Hague		

**Table 1: How ams-plus would have worked in 1997**

Stage 1: Look at the number of seats that the parties actually won in the 1997 election

Conservative	Labour	Lib-Dem	Nationalist	Total
165	418	46	10	659

Stage 2: The number of constituencies will be halved (by pairing neighbouring seats) and they will be fought on *sv*. Each party wins very roughly half its present number, though the Conservatives do worse because they attract fewer second preferences.

Conservative	Labour	Lib-Dem	Nationalist	Total
55	218	42	5	330

Stage 3: Look at the parties' shares of the votes to see if any party has won more than 50 % of first preferences.

Conservative	Labour	Lib-Dem	Nationalist	Other
31%	43 %	17 %	3 %	7 %

Stage 4: If not, look to see how many second preferences the two leading parties have picked up from supporters of the other parties on the ballot for government.

Conservative	Labour
+ 5 %	+ 13 %

Stage 5: Look to see whether either of the leading parties has won more than 50 % of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> preferences.

Conservative	Labour
36 %	56 %

Stage 6:

Having established that one party has 56 %, award it a winner's bonus of enough seats to give it 56 % of the total.

	Conservative	Labour	Lib-Dem	Nationalist
Constituency seats	55	218	42	5
Winner's bonus	-	154	-	-
Total seats		372		
Percentage of seats		56 %		

Stage 7:

Allocate the remaining 175 additional seats to the other parties that won constituency seats to bring them as close as possible to overall proportionality.

	Conservative	Lib-Dem	Nationalist	Other
Share of vote	31%	17 %	3 %	7 %
<i>Constituency seats</i>	55	42	5	9
Additional seats	110	48	8	9
Total seats	165	90	13	18
% constituency seats	17 %	13 %	2 %	3 %
% additional seats	33 %	15 %	2 %	3 %
% total seats	25 %	14 %	2 %	3 %

**Table 2 : Reworking the last four elections on ams-plus (in seats)**

1983

	Con	Lab	LDm	Nat	Total
Fptp seats	397	209	23	4	650
<i>Constituency seats</i>	193	91	30	2	325
<i>Winner's bonus</i>	155	-	-	-	325
<i>Additional seats</i>	-	53	103	6	-
Ams plus seats	348	144	133	8	650

1987

	Con	Lab	LDm	Nat	Total
Fptp seats	376	229	22	6	650
<i>Constituency seats</i>	191	100	23	3	325
<i>Winner's bonus</i>	163	-	-	-	325
<i>Additional seats</i>	-	57	92	5	-
Ams plus seats	354	156	114	8	650

1992 (British Election Survey)

	Con	Lab	LDm	Nat	Total
Fptp seats	336	271	20	7	651
<i>Constituency seats</i>	162	135	15	5	326
<i>Winner's bonus</i>	165	-	-	-	325
<i>Additional seats</i>	-	58	85	9	-
Ams plus seats	327	193	100	13	651

1992 (Democratic Audit)

	Con	Lab	LDm	Nat	Total
Fptp seats	336	271	20	7	651
<i>Constituency seats</i>	162	135	15	5	326
<i>Winner's bonus</i>	-	-	-	-	325
<i>Additional seats</i>	113	91	102	11	-
Ams plus seats	275	226	117	15	651

1997

	Con	Lab	LDm	Nat	Total
Fptp seats	165	418	46	10	659
<i>Constituency seats</i>	55	218	42	5	330
<i>Winner's bonus</i>	-	154	-	-	329
<i>Additional seats</i>	110	-	48	8	-
Ams plus seats	165	372	90	13	659

**Table 3 : Reworking the last four elections (in percentages)**

1983

	Con	Lab	LDm	Nat
% of vote	42	28	25	2
% 2 <sup>nd</sup> choices	11	10		
% 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup>	54	37		
% of seats fptp	61	32	4	1
% of seats ams plus	54	22	20	1

1987

	Con	Lab	LDm	Nat
% of vote	42	31	23	2
% 2 <sup>nd</sup> choices	12	8		
% 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup>	54	39		
% of seats fptp	58	35	3	1
% of seats ams plus	54	24	18	1

1992 (BES)

	Con	Lab	LDm	Nat
% of vote	42	34	18	2
% 2 <sup>nd</sup> choices	8.3	7.8		
% 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup>	50.2	42		
% of seats fptp	52	42	3	1
% of seats ams plus	50.2	30	15	2

1992 (Dem Audit)

	Con	Lab	LDm	Nat
% of vote	42	34	18	2
% 2 <sup>nd</sup> choices	7.5	7.3		
% 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup>	49.4	41.7		
% of seats fptp	52	42	3	1
% of seats ams plus	42	35	18	2

1997

	Con	Lab	LDm	Nat
% of vote	31	43	17	3
% 2 <sup>nd</sup> choices	5	13		
% 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup>	36	56		
% of seats fptp	25	63	7	2
% of seats ams plus	25	56	14	2