

Delusions of Democracy

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IN THE BAD old days, when the kings reigned by divine right, or oligarchies ruled according to temporal self-interest, the citizens knew precisely where they stood: on the outside, looking in. Today, with a judicious use of obfuscation and the abuse of language, we have a democracy—but one in which majority means minority, and democracy (rule by and for the people) means rule by elites.

Ruling political parties in Anglo-Saxon countries—as distinct from West European nations—employ an electoral system which systematically alienates citizens from democratic participation in the affairs of their country. The system, that of the single-member constituency in which the person with the most individual votes is sent to Parliament, explicitly excludes direct representation of large segments of society. This is the “majority” method; but it is in fact the “minority” system, because governments need fewer than 50 per cent of the total votes cast to gain power.

The consequences are twofold. The first is that as a result of a letter sent by Edmund Burke to the sheriffs of Bristol 300 years ago, our political masters can glibly inform us that members of Parliament are representatives—not delegates—who are constitutionally free to act according to their three-line whips, not the wishes of the electorate. The second consequence, as argued by Rousseau, is that the majority (in the arithmetical sense, not the perversion used in political theory) are disenfranchised for stretches of five years.

An alternative voting system is proportional representation (PR). This requires the election of candidates in multi-member constituencies by a system that ensures a strict proportionality between the number of seats won by the parties and the number of votes cast for them. PR was invented in the mid-19th century. It was adopted by West European countries, with the emergence of more than two strong parties, to ensure a more equitable parliamentary representation for the electorate.

Under the present “majority” system a small party which gained, say, 20 per cent of the votes in a constituency would not gain parliamentary representation for those electors. Under PR, however, that party would gain one-fifth of the seats allocated to the constituency—which, if it was a five-member constituency, means that the party would send one member to Parliament.

With the single-member, majority system, a small party would be under-represented in Parliament, for its supporters would normally be thinly spread throughout the country. Only if there were a heavy concentration of supporters in a few districts, as with the Liberals in a few British constituencies, would the party stand a chance of sending forward MPs.

Just how anti-democratic the “majority” system is will become clear from an examination of post-war British election results. I draw heavily for the information about the Liberal Party from an article by David Butler, Arthur Stevens and Donald Stokes, who based their analyses on

nation-wide surveys in 1963, and after the 1964 and 1966 elections⁽¹⁾.

Table 1 shows what would have happened under the purest form of PR, in which a party's seats exactly matched its national percentage of votes cast.

This shows the outcome on the assumption that votes were cast as in fact they were. However, as Butler, Stevens and Stokes emphasise a change to PR would have drastic results on the voting preferences of an emancipated electorate. Many more Liberals would be returned to Westminster, because of several influences. More candidates would stand, for a start; and people would not be deterred by the argument that “To vote Liberal is to waste your vote.”

Table 2 shows the consequences of allowing for “wasted vote” changes in voting behaviour, if (a) half, or (b) 90 per cent of those who said they thought of voting Liberal, had done so.

The mind boggles at the consequences of changes of this magnitude. The present complacency with which politicians treat their supporters would evaporate. The need for some such change would not be disputed by anyone interested in constructing a democracy bearing some resemblance to its classical notion of full (or fuller) participation. For in 1964, 232 MPs were elected on minority votes; in 1966 the figure was 183.

Consider these Labour Party results:

Election	Seats
1945	393
1959	258

In 1959, Labour had nearly 250,000 more votes than in 1945, yet the party had 135 fewer members in Parliament!

There would appear, then, to be a *prima facie* case in favour of PR. There are a number of popular objections to it, however, which have to be examined closely.

1. *That PR would multiply the number of political parties.*

Political parties, it is said, would proliferate; coalitions would be the result, and chaos of the sort witnessed in French political history would follow. There are plenty of reassuring examples to disprove this fallacy. Belgium introduced PR at the turn of the century, to stop the “majority” system killing off the Liberal party. Belgium had a three-party system then, and it has one now. The same goes for Tasmania. I find the French example more interesting. They had the same number of political parties

after the Second World War (under PR) as they had between 1875 and the beginning of the last world war (under the simple-majority second-ballot system).

2. *That PR would fragment society by destabilising the political system.* This is an irrelevant contention. There is no historical evidence to support the idea that introducing PR creates schisms in the body politic. Scandinavia, under PR, is as stable as the UK, under the “majority” system. The intriguing question of whether voting systems influence political alignments, or vice versa, is unresolved one way or the other. France, of

course, is the favourite example quoted by the anti-PR factions. She has a penchant for changing her electoral system (eight times since 1875: of the 25 elections since then, 18 were fought on the "majority" system and seven on variations of PR). But in which direction did the causal influence work? As Dorothy Pickles rightly observes: "... where stable government has proved unachievable, the electoral as well as the party system may reflect this instability."(*)

France, it seems to me, proves nothing more than that if people want a multi-party system, for whatever reasons (economic, religious, ethnic, linguistic), they will form them regardless of the electoral system. The crucial matter that follows from this is: how much political participation should they enjoy?

3. That PR encourages sectional against national interests. The two-party system which is protected by the "majority" voting system, it is said, encourages compromise within party ranks, in order to avoid presenting a disunited front to the electorate; and the parties, because they have a real chance of gaining power, have to cast their nets wide. In contrast, under PR, small parties are



satisfied with a few seats, and do not concern themselves with the weighty responsibilities of power, but simply content themselves with furthering narrow interests.

Again, France is the favourite example. Political theorists point to the fact that parties of the Left and Right (before de Gaulle) resisted moves to form common fronts through which they could gain power.

There are two answers to this. First, as above, if people want specialist parties, i.e., they are not interested in forming mass-based organisations, they will do so despite the electoral system. Second, we mislead ourselves when we talk of two-party systems exemplified, for instance, by North America, or the UK. These nations are multi-party societies. In Britain, to quote just a few obvious cases, we have the Welsh and Scottish Nationalists and the Republicans of Northern Ireland. Members of these organisations have goals narrower than those proclaimed by the two major parties. But they are penalised for that fact. Because of the voting system, they are drowned almost from sight, leaving just two icebergs—the Conservative and Labour Parties—dominating our vision.

In this whole debate, the notion of "compromise" within the ranks of major parties—in order to gain the

ACTUAL AND PROPORTIONAL ALLOCATION OF SEATS

Table 1	1964		1966	
	Actual seats	Seats in proportion	Actual seats	Seats in proportion
Labour	317	282	363	306
Tory	304	277	253	267
Liberal	9	71	12	55

HYPOTHETICAL P.R. RESULT

Table 2	(a)		(b)	
	% votes	seats	% votes	seats
1964				
Labour	37.8	238	35.0	221
Tory	37.0	233	33.8	213
Liberal	25.2	159	31.2	196
1966				
Labour	40.4	254	37.5	236
Tory	36.5	229	34.0	213
Liberal	23.1	145	28.5	179

SOURCE: BUTLER, STEVENS AND STOKES.

power necessary to rule—is presented as a virtue. Politics is the art of the possible, we are told. It is the art only of the possible and in an amoral, or immoral, society. If, as we would claim, our society held as sacrosanct certain



moral principles, then politics (which is the administration of society) becomes something more than just the art of the possible.

If it came to a straight choice between holding principles or jeopardising parliamentary “stability” (by which, methinks, we really mean an easy life for the political elites) then I for one have no doubt what my decisions would be.

While advocating the use of PR, however, I think it should be made clear that experience shows that countries which have adopted this method usually introduce some weighting in favour of the existing larger parties. They have done this by imposing restrictions on minor parties, mathematical bias in the counting of votes, or the allocation of seats on a geographical or constituency basis which thwarted the precise matching of votes to seats. The Scandinavian countries, for example, use what is called the d’Hondt method of the “largest average”, which favours the largest party. Nevertheless, the citizens still have a greater chance of gaining representation in the national assemblies.

But the issue goes deeper than this. The choice of an electoral system determines the secondary forms of political representation. Under PR, pressure groups would be able to conduct their affairs overtly, on the political platform, either demanding that their interests be taken into account in Parliament by existing parties, or they could as a feasible alternative nominate their own candidates.

Our present system stimulates covert bargaining of the sort which theoretically ought not to go on in an “open” society. Pressure groups lobby civil servants behind the scenes; bargains are struck over dinner-time cigars in the St. James’s clubs. A frightening example of current anti-democratic procedures is cited by John P. Mackintosh, author of *The British Cabinet*. He is quoted as stating⁽³⁾ that MPs are prevented from approaching the minister responsible for agriculture when the Annual Price Review negotiations are taking place. “During the two months when the critical decisions are being taken, the Minister, as one holder of the office has put it, ‘goes

into purdah.’ He virtually refuses to see any MPs, even from agricultural constituencies, in case it should bias his view or spoil his negotiations with the NFU.”

The approach from a representative of the people, it seems, is an “extraneous influence.” And MPs are democratic representatives of the people?

That the two dominant parties in a system should resist demands from the minorities for PR is logical. As oligarchies, it would not suit their interests to have irritating groups on the fringe pushing the plural needs of their members. Once established, the political monoliths do everything to preserve their strength.

The behaviour of the two British parties provides contemporary examples. It should have startled nobody to hear Mr. Harold Wilson expound his concept of party unity during the EEC debate. Issues of public policy, for Mr. Wilson, are subservient to the internal organisational needs of the Labour Party.

Mr. Heath is no shining knight in democratic armour either. He applies one rule for himself, another to others. Less than 50 per cent of the electorate backed his party at the last general election, yet he still considered himself sufficiently representative of the nation to take the momentous decision to enter the EEC, and to force his decision through the Commons without allowing the public the right of expression through a referendum, or even allowing his back-benchers the right to a free vote.

But when it comes to tackling members of the electorate, we find a different calculus favoured by the government. In the Industrial Relations Bill closed shops are made illegal. In their place can be substituted “agency” shops; but if an employer refuses to agree to an agency shop, a ballot can be held. To be successful, however, the union has to win not just a “majority” of the votes cast, but a majority of those “eligible to vote.” If this kind of majority condition applied to parliamentary power, Mr. Heath would not be Prime Minister.

Today, we call our society a democracy, with universal suffrage to prove it. But there is universal suffrage in the USSR: is their’s less of a democracy than the slightly older model favoured by Anglo-Saxon countries? The similarities are striking, the differences for the citizen marginal.

For while our governments talk glibly about anti-monopoly legislation, and pay lip service to freedom, they maintain a crude electoral system guaranteed to preserve a political monopoly. Governments talk about forcing greater competition on industrial firms, but carefully eliminate the competition in politics which is the essence of democracy.

In both Anglo-Saxon and Russian systems, the citizen is still on the outside, looking in. The politicians select the primary political goals to which they orientate the citizens. Effective political choice is circumscribed, the

major parties determining the candidates on the voting card. Care is taken to exclude the layman from the centres of power. Bureaucracies are guaranteed to create maximum frustration. Economies are critically dependent on the goodwill of politician and the purse of the taxpayer.

The psychological effects on citizens living under both regimes is, I think, devastating. Lethargy pervades our outlook; we despair at penetrating and influencing the monolithic power structure.

Mass inertia, the twentieth century disease, has settled in once again. It was with us last in the '30s, and out of the bile slithered Hitler, the paradigm of the modern contradiction; few people believed in him, or even wanted him as a political leader; but there was no critical challenge, just scepticism and apathy and yet eventual, inexorable, mind-smothering mass acclaim.

Similar symptoms seem to be emerging today. Few people believe the words of a politician: yet those words go largely unchallenged, and collectively we appear to hope that the politicians will prove us wrong, that they could be trusted, can keep their promises, will deliver the goods.

How can we give up hope? For have we not submitted ourselves to their blandishments? Have we not yielded our individual right of self-determination for the comforting bliss of knowing that they will take care of our needs? When things go wrong, do we not demand that "they"—out there, like Gods, apart from us mortals—come to our rescue?

They cajole us to work harder. They legislate so that we may behave responsibly. They rebuke us with unemployment as retribution for the inflation which we have caused. We resent their words, we don't believe their analyses, we scorn their verdicts. But, yes, we appear to admit—we gave them the mandate to do all this.

At best, governments under the "majority" system have mandates from the minority of citizens.

True, minorities can put up candidates. But the political parties have made sure that they would get little or no time on the TV and radio to project their policies—that time is strictly apportioned in ratio to existing support.

As L. S. Amery, a former Tory Cabinet minister, admitted: "At a general election the voter is not in a position to choose either the kind of representative or the kind of government he would like if he had a free choice. There is a government in being which he can confirm or else reject in favour of the alternative team . . . it is within these narrow limits that his actual power is exercised."⁽⁴⁾

This "power" is one of formally legitimising a government: a sham, rubber-stamping process.

For last year's general election, only 72 per cent of the registered voters bothered to turn out. This is the lowest figure since the mid-30's, the era when we traded-in free will and individual responsibility for a concoction of inertia and totalitarianism.

The cynicism with which the political machines today happily accept the mass contracting out from the political mainstream is matched by the contempt from citizens, who can only express their dissatisfaction with the political elites not by creating their own alternatives (elections are rigged against their efforts) but simply by staying away from the polling booths.

When the people dissent from the orthodox processes of political communication through mute resignation, no free society can ultimately hope to endure.

(1) *Strength of Liberals under different electoral systems*, Parliamentary Affairs, 1969.

(2) *Democracy*, B. T. Batsford, London, 1970, p. 128.

(3) A. H. Hanson & M. Walles, *Governing Britain*, Fontana/Collins, 1970, p. 157.

(4) *Thoughts on the Constitution*, 1947 p. 16.