

**Major electoral reform is now a distinct possibility.
Yet the Left is very divided about what its own attitude should be.**

Dave Cook

Proportional representation: threat or opportunity?



Demonstration of Plaid Cymru members in support of an all-Welsh TV Channel.

A debate among the Left about PR is long overdue. The Alliance make it a central plank of their programme. Several prominent left wing supporters of PR including Arthur Scargill, Robin Blackburn and Tariq Ali,

have entered the fray, adding their voices to those of the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform, set up in 1979, and the Communist Party. However, most left wing opinion within the Labour Party remains implacably opposed to PR, and recently the attack upon it has sharpened.

Obviously something is afoot and it is not difficult to detect what. Opponents of PR in the Labour Party fear that the Tories may agree to some measure of electoral reform in order to get Alliance support in the House of Commons, if they are not able to form an

overall majority after the general election. Supporters of PR within the labour movement argue that in the long run PR would increase the chances for socialism, and that instead of allowing the Alliance to appear as the champions of democratising the electoral system, the Left should vigorously take up the campaign.

Thus there has been a catalyst for both sides of this argument within the Left. And so this debate.

What form of PR?

Many alternatives to the British 'first past the post' system operate in different countries. The French second ballot method is often incorrectly regarded as a form of PR, but by retaining single member constituencies it prevents proportional results. Holland, Sweden, Denmark and Belgium have list systems of PR but they completely sever the link between constituency and MP. The Federal German, and the Additional Member method attempt a compromise, keeping the single member constituency and moving closer to proportional results. In the latter system this is done by 'topping' up a number of seats from the most successful of the losing candidates in the constituency elections, and in the German case from national lists in proportion to each party's total vote. However, both these methods still retain very powerful obstacles to minority parties, in the German case a 5% qualifying 'threshold' having to be surmounted.

As far as the Left's case for PR is concerned these variants all retain undemocratic features in varying degrees. PR by single transferable vote (STV) in 'multi-member' constituencies is what this argument is about. This method is advocated by the Communist Party, the Liberal Party and the Electoral Reform Society, and is used in the Republic of Ireland.

Under this system, each voter numbers the candidates in order of preference on his/her ballot paper. A quota is calculated; for example in a 5 member seat it is 1/6 of the votes cast. Any candidate getting more than the quota is elected immediately. Excess votes above the quota are redistributed according to second preferences. Similarly the votes of unsuccessful candidates are progressively redistributed until all the seats are filled by candidates who pass the quota.

Democracy

Although many of the issues bound up in the case for PR are key strategic ones, the main argument is a matter of democratic principle.

The 'first past the post' system is

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undemocratic in two fundamental ways. Firstly, it is possible for one of the two major parties to get more parliamentary seats than the other and yet poll less votes. More often this has benefited the Tories, for example in 1951 Labour got more votes, but ended up with less seats. Occasionally, as in February 1974 the bias worked the other way. In other words the system is a lottery, capable of distorting representation in favour of the two main parties either way.

Secondly, if there is an element of chance in which of the two main parties the system damages most, there is absolutely none about the penalties it imposes on 'third' parties. Of course this is why the Labour Party switched from its early support for PR to opposition to it in 1926, when it was becoming one of the main beneficiaries of the present system.

These penalties become particularly unjust in the context of the long term decline in support for the two main parties. In October 1951 96.8% of the total turnout of 82.5% voted Labour or Conservative. By May 1979 only 80.8% of the votes cast were for the big two, out of a turnout of 76%. Yet, as we know the 19.2% of votes cast for other parties is grossly under-represented when it comes to parliamentary seats. The present system consistently means the election of

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minority governments. The present Government got its overall majority of 43 with the support of only 1/3 of the electorate and 43.9% of the voters. Indeed, no government since the war has polled 50% or more of votes cast, and often much less. The Left must stand, unambiguously not just for universal suffrage but for representative assemblies which reflect the votes cast. Any equivocation on this hands the democratic argument to the Right, and tarnishes the Left's commitment to democracy.

It is important to add that those who see the choice of electoral systems as primarily about Labour's electoral chances can end up presenting an opportunistic case. It is common, for example, for opponents of PR to argue that the key issue of democracy involved is that of the accountability of a government to the electorate, rather than whether the House of Commons and the government represents the votes cast. This will not do. Proportionality and accountability are opposite sides of the coin only to those who fear that the coin may not spin their way.

The problem for Labour and the Left

Left wing defenders of the present electoral system have to face the fact that some of the problems they allege PR will bring for the Labour Party are with us already in one form or another. Labour's share of the vote has gone down in every general election since 1951 with the single exception of 1966. In 1979 it was below 40% for the third time running, including only a minority of working class voters. It is not PR, but the present system, that has seen the breakdown of two party domination and the spectre of a

by and large, the advocacy of mass politics, has come from outside the traditional soils of Labourism

right wing led centrist coalition placed on the agenda.

It is beyond the scope of this article to go into why this has happened. What I want to argue here, though is that PR can give a boost to the sort of politics, both in the working class movement as a whole, and in the Labour Party, that are needed to break out of the current crisis.

A great deal depends on how the problem is defined. For *the Left* the question we face is not simply how to scrape a Labour majority at the next election on a minority of votes. It is also how in the longer run we can build a genuine political majority for change in a leftwards direction. If the problem is seen only in party political terms, and in the context of the 'first past the post' electoral system, this issue is never faced up to. This is very serious, for without the active support of an overall majority, no major changes in the distribution of wealth and power will be possible.

At present, that potential majority is made up of Labour voters plus some of those who support the Alliance parties, the nationalist parties, the Communist Party, some Tory voters and abstainers who have opted out of party politics. Certainly Labour needs to extend its support and regain lost ground. But if the Left is to build such a political majority it will also need to come to terms with, rather than dismiss, that crucial anti-Tory segment of the electorate who do not (and will not for the foreseeable future) vote Labour. The key strategic problem now facing socialists is how to build a political majority that includes part of the centre but is under the leadership of the Left. In a sense that will be true whatever the electoral system; but PR will force the Left, and in particular Labour, to

face up to this question sooner and more fully than will 'first past the post'.

There is another, it must be said, strategically more distant, aspect of this question: the election—and sustenance—of a government committed to a radical left wing programme.

The Thatcher government has received the support of all manner of 'extra parliamentary' forces in carrying through its attack; within the media and big business, sometimes in state agencies (one has only to think of the increasingly political role of police chiefs) and from within NATO. A left government could count in the main on nothing but hostility from such directions. The present electoral system is not intended to give mandates to policies that challenge the status quo; only for those that administer it. A Left government based on a passive minority of voters could never sustain itself against such opposition. At a minimum, as in France today, it would need the support of a majority of voters. PR will necessitate and ensure an electoral base.

The expression 'Left' rather than 'Labour' has been used deliberately to describe the government that is likely to be in the driving seat in the advanced stages about which I am enjoying the luxury of speculating in these rather bleak times. Because of the realities of our working class movement, such a government will no doubt be predominantly Labour but it is by no means certain that it would be exclusively so. In terms of parliamentary politics, based on PR, this could mean cooperation, on some issues and in some circumstances with political forces to its right and even to its left, since left breakaways from Labour and the strengthening of non-Labour socialist forces may also take place. Such a broader based government was a feature of Popular Unity in Chile in the 70s and similarly of the Mitterrand government in France today.

Thus now, and in the future, a more flexible PR system will face Labour up to the need both to build more deep rooted support than the class loyalty which is now proving such an inadequate foundation, and to consider alliances with other political forces. The present system, though it may provide a fortuitous ability to form a government out of a minority of votes cast, also means that these governments can be powerless and vulnerable because the wider battle for political support has not even been waged, let alone won.

It is unrealistic to envisage that the sort of majority that is needed, both now and in the future, will be built entirely through the vehicle of the Labour Party. Some of the Left of course are contemptuous of any idea

of involving parts of the 'centre'. Others remain locked in internalised struggles within the hermetically sealed canisters of Labour Party organisations, and display a touching faith that provided conference policies are clearly presented to the people, there will be a great mass swing to Labour. Given the remorseless long term character of the party's electoral decline, the likely intensification of internal conflict, and the consolidation of 'centrist' political forces, this seems a pipe dream.

The most realistic trend within the Labour Left, that associated with Benn, Hain, Galloway, and the Labour Coordinating Committee has been emphasising the need for a new activist dimension and, to a lesser extent, the importance of alliances and movements outside the party. However, within the Labour Party left these are minority voices.

By and large, indeed, the advocacy of mass politics, of industrial and 'extra parliamentary' action, of the politicising of the trade union affiliations and the development of broad and democratic movements has come from outside the traditional soils of Labourism, the People's March for Jobs and the revitalisation of CND being cases in point. There is no reason for believing that this will not continue to be the case.

A new impetus for mass politics

The construction of the new sort of political majority that is needed is only going to be possible if there is a greatly increased level of popular mobilisation through the trade unions and a whole range of democratic movements in all areas of life. It will require many initiatives to get the active involvement of working people rather than 'leave it up to the councillor' types of paternalism. It will also be impossible without the strengthening of broad movements of struggle that are independent of particular parties and not seen as their recruiting grounds.

PR would give a new energy to a whole range of minority political parties and democratic movements by increasing their chances of council and even parliamentary representation, forcing their concerns to the fore in a new way. We are talking about pluralism at the base, the inter-action between forms of popular mobilisation and existing representative bodies.

An example of this is the opportunity that PR would provide for black voters. To get groups of black councillors and MPs elected, or at least high votes if they do not get elected, is urgent and a necessity which many people feel overrides 'party' political considerations. Because the principle of proportionality could be made to work for



Gwynfor Evans, Plaid Cymru MP

black voters, in the same way as it can on behalf of party voters, this could have two powerful results. Firstly the main parties would have to speed up the adoption of black candidates. Secondly in constituencies where a black community was well organised, there would be strong pressure on parties like the Labour Party, (and the Communist Party), to reach an electoral agreement with the black organisations. Fortunately this process is already underway in some wards without PR. The same processes could also work to the advantage of women, tenants and other groupings.

So PR would give the political parties a strong electoral incentive to broaden their concerns. It is worth bearing in mind that despite its 5% threshold, the German

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system has not stopped the Greens achieving representation in state assemblies, and this has forced the SPD to respond to pressures no longer just to its right—the Free Democrats—but now also from the left—the Greens.

One of the results of the present system bears particularly heavily on the Communist Party, although it penalises other left wing minority parties as well, because it is reasonable to assume that it is the politically conscious Labour voters who are most

determined not to 'let the Tories in'. So by removing this straightjacket whereby some socialists feel impelled to vote in this way, rather than for policies they may favour more, PR could enable some localised improvement in Communist votes. This would help strengthen the pressure for the sort of politics we are talking about, but also could mean that in certain areas the question of some form of electoral agreement by Labour with the Communist Party—and indeed other parties—would at least get an airing, and become an objective for political pressure. At present it is never discussed, because most 'minority' votes are so low and electoral agreements are prohibited by Labour rule.

This seems a much more likely avenue for the objective of a closer political relationship between Communist and Labour than that usually recommended by those of the Labour Left who would value such unity, and by a minority in the Communist Party—namely that the Communists should not stand candidates in order to clear the way for affiliation approaches.

PR would of course also greatly strengthen the position of the Alliance and nationalist parties within the councils and the Commons. However, by under representing the real support that exists for policies other than those of the two main parties, the 'first past the post' method does Labour no favours. Far better to face the party up to the changes that are needed than to maintain the protective cocoon with which it disguises the extent of its crisis.

Political pluralism

By and large the Labour Left do not have a vision of a plurality of political forces contributing to political change. Instead they see an increasing absorption of movements and individuals into the Labour Party. It will not be a surprise to readers of this article that its author does not share this approach, especially if it goes with a tendency to reduce vigorous democratic movements into electoral adjuncts of the Labour Party.

However, there are longer term issues at stake in the argument about plurality—and PR—which relate to the sort of socialism we are trying to achieve. We need to emphasise the role that a transformed Labour Party can play, and the importance of working class leadership, but must also stress another equation—a plurality of forces in the achievement of revolutionary change, and political pluralism after it. The 'first past the post' system, by blocking off other forms of working class and democratic political representation, has effectively put Labour into 'one party' power in some areas. For

'safe' Labour seat it has sometimes become possible to read 'corrupt' Labour seat. There have also been the undemocratic consequences of single party rule in the socialist countries.

The pressure for a 'single anti-Tory' candidate is a straitjacketed, undemocratic consequence of the present electoral system. It has nothing to do with a vision of a socialist democracy in which different political viewpoints openly contend. PR is more likely to produce the sort of politicised electorate that is the best guarantee that under socialism democracy will grow.

The Left's case against PR

Arguments against PR from within the Left fall into three categories; firstly guilt by association, the fact that sections of right wing opinion are also in favour of it; secondly, that PR would make the election of a majority Labour government more difficult, and thirdly that PR is a force for centrism, favouring coalition government, reducing the link between constituency and MP, strengthening the power of party bureaucracies, and stressing proportionality rather than accountability.

There is no doubt that some Tories, although neither the party nor its leadership as a whole, are in favour of PR. However, supporters and opponents of PR are to be found across the entire political spectrum so that does not really settle anything. It would be strange indeed if some sections of reactionary opinion were not looking at political alternatives to political institutions

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which have served them well up until the present crisis. In similar ways some Tories, for example Lord Hailsham, have recommended a written constitution and a constitutional court as a possible check on a left-dominated House of Commons. We have to determine our attitude, not for twists and turns by the Right, but according to principle and the interests of the working class and its socialist aims.

When it comes to speculating about the likely effects of PR, we have to beware of projecting voting behaviour based on the present system into what would be a completely different situation; similarly with analogies based on Irish experience. Their politics differ in so many respects that it would be foolish to attribute their recent



David Steel, leader of the Liberal Party

hung parliaments to the STV method. The reality is that if PR were to be introduced in Britain no one knows exactly how the arithmetic would work out. Nonetheless, in the short run it would certainly make the return of a majority (ie, parliamentary majority) Labour government more difficult. But, as we have already argued, it would serve to greatly strengthen the longer term possibilities for Labour and the Left.

Opponents of PR argue that under it, voters would exert less influence on the sort of government that is elected than they do now. By enabling greater representation for 'third' and minority parties, PR may make it more difficult for any single party to get an overall majority of seats, and this would make coalitions more likely. These will be fixed by political dealing at the centre, over which the voters have no control and express no view when they make their choice at the ballot box. Tony Benn, in particular, has argued that it is more democratic to present a clear policy platform to the electorate, which they know will then provide the substance of the government's programme, than for the latter to be the product of negotiation between parties after the election.

The argument that PR may produce a more representative Parliament but a government which is less accountable for the electorate, appears powerful at first sight. It is less so if the following points are considered. Firstly the Labour Party has a long 'unaccountable' tradition, of ignoring manifesto promises, and whether this continues or not has nothing to do with the electoral system. It will be decided by the

course of political struggle and the degree of 'extra parliamentary' pressure. Secondly voters are not stupid. Alongside any trend towards coalition governments would also go pressure for programmatic and electoral agreements *before* the election with parties making clear in the manifesto their minimum conditions for entering any coalition. Nor must we fall for the argument that all the pressures in any coalition will be to 'trim to the centre'. The fact is that some of Labour's partners in a future coalition may be more advanced and more determined on some issues than they are.

The most obvious defect of the STV method of PR is that it requires very large constituencies. It would therefore be much more difficult for constituents to influence their MP. Also as far as the Labour Party is

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concerned, many of the Left's advances have been strongest at this level, and mandatory reselection has been a pivot of left wing strategy. All this would be threatened with 5 member constituencies of 315,000 electors. These are powerful arguments and they cannot be dismissed, especially as on other fronts the Left is arguing for decentralisation of decision-making, and reducing the power of central bureaucracies.

Of course it is possible to argue that existing constituencies sometimes have no real unity anyway, and that constituents often turn to other MPs if their own is unsympathetic. Also PR would open up avenues to accountability for minorities at present excluded, and in multi-member constituencies MPs would have to divide the area up between them for 'surgery' work. This having been said, I feel that this is the strongest argument against PR, and it can only be overcome in the context of the total balance sheet.

What is hopeful about the present argument is that sections of the Labour Left are beginning to recognise that this balance sheet is positive, and that there is a growing contradiction between their overall democratising perspective and their support for an undemocratic electoral system. It is time for a new pressure for the STV form of PR, not least because its absence leaves a vacuum into which some of PR's right wing advocates could place one of the less democratic alternatives. •