

# REVIEWS

## WHAT IS PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

Vernon Bogdanor  
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Proportional representation is a basic democratic demand in British society today. Opinion polls show four to one people in favour of it. Electoral reform organisations and a number of political parties, including Liberals, SDP and Communists are for PR. (The Labour and Conservative parties oppose it.)

Vernon Bogdanor has written a lucid analysis of the defects of the present voting system, and the advantages of PR. But at the end of the day he tries to equate it with a non-class view of Britain. 'Those who support PR must also take a particular view about British society. They must assume it is so fundamentally united that the basis for agreement between different parties is actually present.'

Why? Proportional representation is merely a voting method that ensures that representation in Parliament is equivalent to the votes cast for various parties by the electorate. It will not eliminate the deep class conflicts in Britain any more than it has in other capitalist countries. The Tories will continue to pose solutions to the crisis that are in the interests of big business. The working class will continue to defend itself against these attacks and to put forward its own solution to the crisis.

One can understand Tory opposition to PR; it is at one with their attacks on trade union rights, their proposals to restrict and in some cases to abolish local councils, their proposed increase in police power. All are anti-democratic and against longstanding British traditions. But the struggle for democracy on all fronts is crucial for the renewal of left forces following their heavy

defeats in the general election. The working class, and the allies it can win, need to defend existing democratic rights, but we also need to go beyond these, to extend the frontiers, to enable people to have ever more control over their own lives.

Parliament began as a thoroughly undemocratic institution. Working class and democratic struggle over two centuries brought about many changes — adult suffrage, secret ballots, votes at eighteen, etc. Further steps are needed if parliament is to be transformed into a body truly representative of the will of the people. PR would ensure at least that the wishes of the people expressed by their votes would be reflected in the composition of the parliament elected.

Bogdanor is right when he says that 'it is to take an over-simplified view of politics to imagine political alternatives can be confined to two ideologies — free-market liberalism and socialism'. Modern capitalist society is exceedingly complex. The composition of the working class itself has undergone great changes. There are different middle strata. There are interests of gender and race as well as class. Parliament must mirror these complexities, must become one of the fields of struggle for a broad democratic alliance of the working class and a wide variety of social movements and forces. To do that proportional representation is essential.

As Bogdanor points out, the present electoral system means that a party with a minority of votes can win a majority of seats. Minority parties are discriminated against unless their support is highly concentrated. The voting system forms and maintains a two-party system.

Bogdanor also describes in detail the German system, where electors have two votes, one for a constituency MP, the other for a party list. Half the seats in the

Bundestag are filled by constituency MPs directly elected, as in Britain. The other half are allocated to parties so that representation is in the same proportion as the overall vote, providing that the party receives over 5%. In my view this places too much power with the party machines.

The single transferrable vote is the system most widely canvassed in Britain, and Bogdanor uses Ireland as the source for examples of it in practice. It requires multi-member constituencies, returning, say, 5 MPs. The elector has one vote, and he or she numbers the ballots in order of preference for candidates. If a candidate receives more first preference votes than are needed to win the seat, the surplus votes for that candidate are transferred to their second preferences. Or if a ballot paper's first preference has the lowest vote, that candidate is eliminated, but the vote is transferred to second and subsequent preferences.

This is a simple system for the voter. It means that the vote always counts, as far as preferences are made. It gives the elector an opportunity to express preferences for different candidates in the same party and this has the by-product that it strengthens the relationship between the MP and the constituency—almost every member of the Dail in Ireland is a longstanding resident of his or her constituency. All the evidence is that representation of women and of ethnic minorities is greatly improved under this system.

In the preface Bogdanor says: 'Although the book reaches certain conclusions, I shall not be too disappointed if readers emerge with a different verdict. The book's purpose is to clarify.' It certainly does that in describing the different systems, and in putting the case for PR. As such it is a good read, and also a useful reference source.

**John Peck**

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