



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

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Greater Fairness in British Elections

The Liberal Democrats and Proportional Representation

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B.A. Essay

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Summary:

The modern British electoral system was established in the late 19th century. It was originally purely personal as the elector voted for one candidate in a single-member constituency. The candidate who received the highest number of the votes won the seat. The votes cast on other candidates had no value or influence. This first-past-the-post system, as it is called, has always been controversial as the result of the elections only reflects the franchise of the winning candidate's voters. Less than half of the electors decide who will be elected.

From the 1920s onwards, the Liberal Party, and later the Liberal Democrats, have been campaigning for greater fairness in British elections by adopting a proportional representation system, a system in which every vote counts and the number of seats a party wins corresponds to its share of the vote. The progress of the PR system over the last century and the Liberals' contribution is studied in this essay. It unveils an astounding advancement towards proportional representation and that the Liberals have been very influential in spite of their weak political position in Parliament most of the time.

Social changes have weakened the FPTP system and demands have increased for an adjustment in the form of PR. The support for parties other than the two main parties has substantially increased without their being rewarded accordingly in their share of seats. This exaggerates the bias of the system and increases instability in politics. To ease pressure for a change in Westminster elections, various proportional representation systems have already been implemented for elections in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland at local and regional level as well for the European Parliament and the London Assembly. Finally, it is now proposed to use a PR system for the reformed House of Lords chamber. The fact that FPTP is on the way out and PR voting is gaining ground can be directly attributed to Liberal and Liberal Democrat party policies and persistence.

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Greater Fairness in British Elections:

The Liberal Democrats and Proportional Representation

Introduction.

There are certain basic features in liberal policy which explain why the Liberal Party and its successors have for a long time been strong on the franchise issue. These principal characteristics are stated in the preamble to the Liberal Democratic Party's constitution ("Our Constitution"). Liberals wish to create a society based on individual liberties which are secured through a structure of equal rights. Liberalism underlines the freedom of the individual, which includes the right to freedom of conscience, as well as the individual's right to develop his talents to the full and to be influential in decisions shaping the community. Being liberal is acknowledging that the individual can judge his own affairs and his decision should be respected. Social diversity is a consequence of a liberal policy as it denotes an open-minded and tolerant disposition. Individual freedom means that sovereignty and authority in a democracy derives from the people, the individuals. Devolution of power from above to those closer to the individual and enhancing social diversity are inevitably policies to implement liberal ideology. Suffrage is essential for the individual to exercise his rights. Each man's vote must be of significance for the result, otherwise the individual is deprived of his rights due to an undemocratic franchise. The voting system must provide results which reflect the individual's decision if it is to be fair.

Liberalism has a long history as an ideology, emerging first in the seventeenth century. As it is important to understand the Liberal Party's emphasis on a new election system instead of the first-past-the-post, it is necessary to give a short historical overview (See Eccleshall, 2003: 17-46 for details).

The emergence of a modern capitalist society in the 17th century created a new class of people which did not fit in the then traditional feudal system of inherited power with the absolute monarchy at its apex. This new class had to confront the authoritarian authority to secure its interests. This coincides with radical Protestants challenging both secular and ecclesiastic authorities and claiming freedom for ordinary people to judge the affairs of government and choose their own path to salvation. Until then there had been a rigid hierarchical social system which rested upon the unshakeable belief that the monarch's power derived from God and was dispersed through the nobility down to the subjects, whose role was only to obey, not question. The demand for change was in the name of individual rights or even natural rights. Liberals, who demanded structural social change, wanted to free the

individuals or to emancipate them from constraints of their activities from the hierarchy. It was a radical shift in power from authority to the individual. Liberals claimed, as early Protestants did, that ordinary people could manage their own affairs in various spheres of daily life without instructions from the hierarchy and, in addition, liberals boldly stated that the individual could also judge the government themselves. As early as in the 1640s, during the Civil War period, there emerged a national political movement, the Levellers, with a radical manifesto for constitutional changes. Their premise was natural freedom and equality for every man. They wanted to displace the rigid hierarchy with a new social system of equal rights with individuals' autonomy in various important areas of their lives. The only legitimate authority, according to the Levellers, was that consented to by those affected by it. This is nothing short of a revolution as it deprived the monarch and the hierarchy of its authoritarian power over the subjects' lives and made every man his own master in many important areas of his life. Freedom of individuals was to be gained by pushing back the power of the government.

Ever since then, the individual's right to resist arbitrary power and control his own life has been the pivotal point of liberal policy. This explains why individual freedom is the fundamental liberal value. Another vital factor of this early radical ideology is the equality of individuals. Eccleshall writes that liberalism "is in a significant sense an equalitarian doctrine" (Eccleshall, 2003: 25) as liberals claimed that individuals were equally entitled to freedom. The early liberals considered authoritarian government as the greatest threat to individual freedom, but later liberals in the late 19th century, when considerable achievement had been made in limiting arbitrary power, thought that economic social injustice was a major obstacle to the individual in exercising his freedom. From then on the policy became to use the state to improve the financial position of the poor so that they could enjoy their rights and be useful citizens. The third issue which helps to explain the importance of the franchise system for the liberals is the idea of a responsible citizen. Right from the beginning, liberals have stressed strongly the duty or the citizenship of the individual as they believe that his contribution is crucial for society. Since the individual shows his virtuous and dutiful citizenship, i.e. by taking part in vital decisions through his suffrage, then an unjust voting system undermines his contribution. Not only is the individual deprived of his rights but the society as a whole suffers when numerous individuals cannot contribute in important matters. But the emphasis on citizenship meant that 19th century liberals linked the franchise with property as it was the best means to determine the quality of the individual and prove him worthy of the right.

As can be seen from this short historical background to liberal policy, it is obvious that core liberal issues are individual freedom, equal rights and dutiful citizenship. Each one of these areas is badly affected by the first-past-the-post voting system. This explains why the Liberal Party and later the Liberal Democratic Party, have for a long time campaigned for an improvement in this vital area.

1. Adoption of the policy of proportional representation in the election system.

1.1. The franchise, redistribution and equal rights.

The 19th century was a period of radical electoral reforms in the United Kingdom. The restricted franchise was gradually extended by the Great Reform Act of 1832 until the Fourth Reform Act in 1918, when the suffrage finally became general for adults of both sexes. Ten years later, in 1928, the Equal Franchise Act lowered the age limit for women to be equal with that of men. Liberals were the progressive political force pressing for reforms as they stood for the growing middle class and resented the ruling aristocracy. This was in line with liberal ideology of shifting the power to responsible individuals as they had the right to resist or check the government, as there should be no authority without the consent of those who were governed. Various aspects of the franchise came under question, such as sex, age, economic status and independence of the electorate, how the vote was cast, and the comparison of influence between the voters and the number and size of the constituencies. The proportional representation system is put forward relatively early by intellectuals and some Liberal MPs as a solution to correct a system highly biased against minorities. Already in 1867 the Representative Reform Association is founded by Thomas Hare, a liberal political thinker, to campaign for parliamentary reform through a PR system. It ceased to operate in 1874 and a decade later The Proportional Representation Society was established. It is still running under the name of the Electoral Reform Society and advocates PR in British elections. The Liberal Party was founded in 1859 but it can be argued that it had emerged as early as in 1832. William Gladstone himself was of this opinion in 1874, when he observed that the 1832 Reform Act had in effect marked the birth of the Liberal Party (Brown, 2011: 46). Even though liberal politicians were in the forefront of PR elective reform, the Liberal Party did not at first adopt the policy. In fact the party's leaders were hostile towards it. Joseph Chamberlain was antagonistic to PR, for example, and in 1884 William Gladstone, then Prime Minister, made an agreement with the leader of the opposition, Lord Salisbury, on the contents of the Third Reform Act which created one-member constituencies almost

everywhere with the first-past-the-post system (Hart, 1992: 122). Nearly 130 years later this system is still in effect for parliamentary and local elections in England. Only after the collapse of the Liberals after the First World War, when the party was on the receiving end of the FPTP system's undemocratic anomalies, did the party leaders reconsider their stern view. In 1925 Lloyd George regretted his stance towards PR in the 1918 Reform Act, admitting to the editor of the *Manchester Guardian* that he had made a great mistake. In 1918, he said, he could have carried PR through Parliament when he was Prime Minister but now it was too late (Bogdanor, 2007). It was not until the Liberal Party's manifesto for the 1922 general election that PR was on the agenda to re-adjust the electoral system. It was not in the manifesto for the 1923 election, presumably since Lloyd George did not agree with it. PR reappeared in the 1924 manifesto, but Lloyd George was clearly still ambivalent about it, saying that he believed in a second ballot to create a majority of votes behind a candidate, obviously not a PR system, and later still making hostile remarks about PR (Hart, 1992: 220). This lack of decisive policy in the Liberal Party during the reign of the Labour's minority government was extremely unfortunate, as it probably squandered the opportunity to push for PR in a deal with the other two major parties. The Liberal Party was tormented by internal division from 1919 and severe personal conflicts from 1916 onwards between two of its leaders, Asquith and Lloyd George. The Labour Party managed to come out stronger and after the general election in 1924 it had swept the Liberal Party permanently aside and taken its place as one of the two strong parties in Britain through the effect of the electoral system.

However, for nearly a century, from 1832 until 1928, the liberals in Parliament pushed through radical changes to the franchise, which were of great significance and deserve to be mentioned. The main objective in these changes for the liberals was to extend the suffrage, provide individuals with equal influence in politics and government and to remove various forms of privileges. Arthur I. Cyr (1988) points out that the 19th-century liberals were in fact representatives of the middle class and opposed to the granting of power to the working class, which they claimed were uneducated and did not have the competence to hold voting rights. But the liberal view, according to Cyr (1988), was that individuals could improve and gain their rights when they had proved worthy of them. So abolition of discrimination was not the aim, but a change in the basis of it.

The changes made concern mainly the franchise and the redistribution of seats in parliament. The franchise was extended in stages. The first reform act in 1832 handed the voting rights to the urban middle class. The next reform act in 1867 added the urban working class to the group of voters. The third step was in 1884 when the rural working class attained

its rights, and then 60% of adult males could vote. The fourth phase for males came with the 1918 Reform Act which ensured the franchise for practically all males and women over 30 for the first time. The final step came in 1928 when the Equal Franchise Act was passed. The suffrage age for women was lowered and made equal to that of men. The essential change came in 1867 when the franchise was extended to the urban part of the working class. In spite of liberals' reluctance, until then, to prolong rights beyond those of established citizens, Gladstone, the leader of the Liberal Party, demanded the change and forced the Conservative government to go further in reforms than it ever really wanted to. In 1884 the Liberal Party was in power and Gladstone sat as Prime Minister and the Liberals extended the franchise to the working class in the counties with for the Third Reform Act. It was essential for the autonomy of the individual and the strengthening of the essence of the suffrage to make the ballot secret in 1872. Of no less significance for the value of elections was the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act in 1883. Both these pieces of legislation, also driven by Gladstone's government, more or less abolished bribery and selling of votes. Liberals were strongly involved in all major improvements of the franchise from 1832 to 1918. The Liberal leader was the Prime Minister of the government except in 1832 and 1867, but in those instances the liberals used their strength and were still dominant and forceful in bringing about liberal progress.

The second main item of the reform acts aimed at mending the existing inequitable system by a redistribution of the seats. The Industrial Revolution which began in the middle of 18th century had greatly changed the demographic landscape. Some boroughs had declined and others had greatly increased populations, but the division into parliamentary constituencies did not reflect these changes. Therefore small boroughs were greatly over-represented when compared with industrial communities. The Great Reform Act disenfranchised 143 borough seats and created 135 new ones. Again the Third Reform Act of 1885 enacted a large redistribution of parliamentary seats. In England and Wales 160 seats were redistributed. Three special boundary commissions had prepared the proposals under instructions to obtain equal populations in the constituencies. These changes lessened the inequality of the value of the vote. Before the 1885 Act the largest electorate was 250 times larger than the smallest, but after the Act the difference was reduced to being 8 times larger. The task to end the unjust system of "rotten boroughs" began in 1832 and was finally ended by the Third Reform Act. However, the conclusion did not meet the demands for constituencies of equal size, put forward by movements like the Chartists. In these Acts there were no provisions for a consistent ratio of seats to population, or electors to representatives.

No upper limit was set for the maximum number of people a constituency should have. Only between the years 1944 and 1947 did laws provide a restriction on any deviation of the electorate from a quota. This underlines that the focus of politicians has been more on the territorial representation of the electoral system than on the equal value of the vote. Matthew Roberts has written on electoral reforms and in his view the redistribution of the Reform Acts of the 19th century were not only to extend the franchise and equalize the value of the vote, but also to adjust parliament to interests of property, wealth and industry (Roberts, "History and Policy"). The opinion was that parliament did not represent people but places, and specifically interests. Therefore the size of population was nonessential, while territory or interests were. These are two conflicting ideas of representation. Those striving for equal voting rights are stressing the right of the people regardless of location or occupation. It is Roberts' conclusion that an emphasis on communities of interests has always been stronger in the reform process, and that the size of population is only a secondary consideration even after the Third Reform Act. The politicians' way to ensure that interests were not swept away by the rapidly growing number of voters was to create single-member constituencies. The interests to be carefully guarded were those of the land owners, the aristocracy, manufacturers and the political parties. These parties learned that they could reasonably give way to the pressing demand for more rights to the middle and working classes by extending the franchise and equalling the vote. The riots in Britain before the 1832 Reform Act and during these years in Europe were a loud alarm which was not misunderstood, especially so shortly after the bloody revolution in France. These demands were supported by many intellectuals and idealists. They set forward the arguments and reasons and formed the liberal ideology which eventually won the debate as to how a country should be governed, who should decide it, and in what way the power should be held in check. Political movements such as the Chartists and the Representative Reform Association supported the advance of democracy. Both of them stressed the importance of the equal value of the vote and the Chartists wanted universal suffrage for all males. The Liberal Party was for extending the suffrage and in was power for a large part of the period, but the other party, the Conservative Party was mainly against it. A compromise had to be made to some extent with the Conservatives and the aristocracy who were in control of the House of Lords. The agreement of most consequence was made in November 1884 between the two party leaders Gladstone and Lord Salisbury, and this determined the contents of the Third Reform Act. Single-member constituencies became dominant and have stayed so ever since for the Westminster elections. This proved to be the way to preserve the value of interests above the value of the vote, in spite of a continuing

extension of the suffrage until it became universal. Roberts states that single-member constituencies are both outdated and anti-democratic by design. This seems obvious when observing the influence of the votes cast, for example, in the latest general election in May 2010. No candidate received a clear majority of his/her constituency's electorate. Only 217 MPs were elected by a majority of the votes cast and 8 MPs got fewer votes than 20% of the electorate. Consistently since February 1974, the majority of the votes have been wasted in the sense that the vote did not contribute to sending anyone to Parliament. The ratio was 52.8% in the 2010 general election. And when votes being surplus to winners' requirements are added to this, the proportion of votes wasted or partially wasted by the system was 71.1%. There were 8 English counties where a party with more than a quarter of the vote ended up unrepresented in that area (UK General Election 2010, Analysis and Report, Electoral Reform Society). The single-member constituencies system creates many safe seats based on strong local allegiances towards a party which is different from the tendency over a larger population. The Electoral Reform Society's report evaluates that only about 200 seats of the 650 in Parliament are seriously contested in elections and that the outcome of the 2010 general election is that safe seats are safe. The ERS's report provides substantial evidence for Roberts' opinion and his explanation of the outcome of the Third Reform Act as a way to preserve interests from the effect of increasing the number of voters fourfold. Hart (1992: 108-109) reveals that Lord Salisbury wanted to protect minorities and ensure that they were represented in the House of Commons in proportion to their strength and therefore considered the PR system seriously. Hart links this with the Conservatives' worries about the coming of a new class of voters. They feared annihilation in elections and would be greatly underrepresented. On the other hand, Gladstone, then Prime Minister, was profoundly against minority or proportional representation (Hart, 1992: 105). Roberts explains why the single-member seats system became the solution by pointing out the nature of the redrawing of the constituencies. They were roughly of equal size, geographically compact and should be socially homogeneous and therefore the population was likely to have similar socio-economic interests. This was of special interest for the parties as the constituencies became easier to manage. Roberts is of the opinion that these two points explain why this system was created and the fact that there was no other alternative agreeable. It handed the two large parties good tools with which to manipulate the political scene and was not too affected by the large number of new voters. At least this new system preserved the system of two parties alternately in power which still is operating more than 125 years later as the ERS report reveals. Despite the fact that a majority within the Liberal Party favoured a PR system and

that the Conservatives saw PR as a way to minimize the damage of extending franchise, the leaders still preferred to choose a version which was more likely to hand them greater power and more often than foreseen under a PR system. This was at the expense of the voters.

Two other pieces of legislation increasing the political value of the popular vote need to be mentioned since the franchise was in fact extended by then. The first is the firm policy of the Liberals to introduce elected councils into local government. In 1888 the Local Government Act was passed as it was part of the price that Lord Salisbury's minority government had to pay for Liberals Unionist's support. Six years later the Liberal government extended the legislation to district and parish level with the Parish Councils Act ensuring every voter a single vote on all matters which arose and the remarkable innovation, of women being able to both vote and stand for election. The second legislation, the Parliament Act in 1911, is of great significance. It abolished the absolute veto of the House of Lords over legislation and transformed it into a mere suspensory veto. The Liberal government which had been obstructed by the peers in its social reform policy reacted strongly against the House of Lords' decision in 1909 to vote down the budget. Two parliamentary elections were held in January and December 1910 showing a sound majority in the House of Commons for the government's reforms. This secured the Liberal government the King's support for creating hundreds of new peers to overcome the Tory majority in the House of Lords. The battle was then won and the peers passed the Parliament Act which destroyed the power of the hereditary chamber with the abolition of the veto. Now the upper chamber could only delay new legislation. The absolute veto is only retained on extending the length of the five year interval between elections (Bogdanor, 2007: 160-64). Crippling the power of the House of Lords was perhaps the most crucial victory on the way to a democratic society by giving the franchise in general elections to the lower House almost all the weight a vote can have. This achievement on behalf of the Liberals must be singled out as outstanding in the long process of increasing the public's voting rights.

It took almost a century to ensure a universal suffrage for all adults over 21 years of age, male and female. When the journey began in 1830 less than 10% of male adults were eligible to vote, and then only to the lower House. There were no electoral registers, the vote had to be cast in public, voters were heavily influenced by the rich and powerful, bribery and corruption was endemic, and the distribution of the seats was terribly unjust. When the result is observed in 1928 after the Equal Franchise Act it is a revolution in spite of the voting system's flaws. The reigning hierarchy gave stiff resistance all the way and sometimes there was severe social unrest. It is remarkable that a bloody revolution or a serious uprising was

avoided in the light of the prolonged delay for popular rights in a society plagued for decades with the most serious flaws of early capitalism.

1.2. The progress of proportional representation.

Although the proportional representation system has not been applied in parliamentary elections, support for the cause has from the beginning of the reform period been considerable and even strong. The issue has been raised in parliament on several occasions. It has been debated and motions proposed and sometimes even passed. The liberal cause did have some achievements during this period before proportional representation became an official party policy in the 1920s. The weight of the cause was mostly carried by Liberal MPs as the party leaders usually rejected PR and instead favoured redistribution of seats through one-member constituencies to equalize the value of the vote. Sometimes the Conservatives leaned towards a PR solution to retain some influence for their interests as they expected the large working class vote to go against them. At least 10 times, legislation was passed in parliament and 9 of them made the statute book, having some PR element or at least deviating from the single vote in first-past-the-post system in favour of minority groups (see Hart 1992 for details).

1. Limited vote in Parliament 1867 – 1885.

John Stuart Mill and other advocates of PR were unsuccessful in the Second Reform Act 1867. An amendment to the Reform Bill for a limited vote in 13 multi-seat constituencies was moved in the House of Lords to protect the interests of property. Mills and those who shared his view supported the amendment as a start to a better electoral system. The motion was passed and became part of the law until it was abolished 1885 by the next reform act. The limited vote is applied in a multi –member constituency, each elector has fewer votes than the number of seats to be filled. In the 1867 version the voter had two votes in 12 three-seat constituencies and three votes in one four-seat constituency. Limited vote is a variant of the cumulative vote. In a cumulative voting system the voters have as many votes as there are seats to be filled and the voter can accumulate his votes on one or more candidates. The limited vote had a bad reputation and was not defended when abolished, but Jenifer Hart's study reveals that it served its purpose in 11 of the 13 constituencies. The limited vote secured the Conservatives as a minority party in the elections seats in Manchester, London and Glasgow which they would not have received under the FPTP single seat system and the Liberals gained some seats as well. Only in Birmingham and partly in Glasgow did the

Liberal Party organise their voters to defeat the purpose of the limited vote and deprive minority parties of the share of the seats (Hart, 1992: 119-121).

2. Cumulative voting of school boards 1870 – 1902.

In the Education Act from 1870, the cumulative vote was proposed and accepted at the elections to school boards which were set up to supply and manage schools. Objections were raised to the government bill as the board would totally consist of representatives of the majority of the electorate. The dividing issue was religion and it was considered unacceptable that the minority would be unrepresented. It was Lord Frederick Cavendish, Liberal MP, who initiated the amendment and Prime Minister Gladstone accepted it on behalf of the government because it would reduce acrimony and animosity in elections. In 1885 the Liberal MP Lubbock proposed a select committee to look into the mode of voting of school boards. The government agreed and the work of the committee resulted later in the 1888 report of the Royal Commission on the Elementary Education Acts. It favoured retaining some form of PR in school boards elections and wanted the single transferable vote instead of the cumulative vote as the former is a better and simpler system to obtain the merits of the latter. The recommendation of the committee was not implemented, however. The 1902 Education Act abolished school boards in England and Wales but they were retained with the cumulative vote in Scotland (Hart, 1992: 77-78,129).

3. Cumulative vote of local government in Ireland 1892.

In 1892 the government's bill of creating county and district councils in Ireland proposed multi-membered constituencies elected by the cumulative vote. The reasons given for this were that under the single-member constituency system many feared that Protestants in the south and Catholics in the north would be unrepresented. This argument is interesting as it claims it is necessary to protect the rights of the minorities in Ireland but not in other parts of the United Kingdom. The bill had the vital support of the government and was bound to reach the statute book, but it was withdrawn shortly before the government fell (Hart, 1992: 132-133).

4. Single transferable vote in Scottish school boards 1918 - 1929.

The Scottish school boards were retained in the 1902 Education Act and were elected under the cumulative vote as before. There was a strong branch of the PRS in Scotland and some larger school boards had passed resolutions in favour of the single transferable vote. In 1918

the government inserted STV in its bill for reorganizing the administration of education in Scotland. This legislation went through without opposition. Elections were held four times under this system, and the system was considered as having achieved its main purpose of fair representation of religious opinions. In 1928 the powers of local education authorities were transferred to County Councils.

5. Single transferable vote in the Government of Ireland Act 1914.

The British government introduced into parliament a bill on Irish Home Rule in 1912. An Irish two-chamber parliament was established. The members of the upper House, the Senate, were to be nominated and for the elected body, the Irish House of Commons, the first-past-the-post system was proposed, with the exception that 31 members were to be elected in 9 multi-member constituencies by the so-called block vote. In this system the electors have as many votes as there are seats to be filled but can only cast one vote per candidate. This is not a version of the proportional representation system; on the contrary, with synchronized voting the largest group can win every seat and prevent minorities from obtaining any seat. This was heavily criticised by the Irish Proportional Representation Society, founded a year earlier on the incentive of the Liberal MP Leonard Courtney, who was the president of the British PR society. In Ireland Protestants were a minority group in the south and Catholics in the north. An election system which thus protected the rights of the minorities of interest and appealed to people in both ranks, Unionists and Nationalists. The IPRS organised a campaign for PR for both houses which demonstrated wide support for their claim. The British government relented and proposed that the Senate would be elected on the PR principle, using the single transferable vote, after a period of nomination. The advocates of PR pushed for further changes and secured an STV vote in place of the block vote system for the 31 seats in multi-seat constituencies in the lower chamber. The government accepted this reluctantly on the grounds that circumstances in Ireland were “absolutely special and exceptional” as Prime Minister Asquith put it. This was the first time the parliament of the United Kingdom approved a PR system for elections to a popular elected assembly. However, the bill was further amended in the House of Lords which passed a motion in 1914 stating that no constituency should return fewer than three members. This in effect incorporated a PR system to every seat in the Irish House of Commons. World War I broke out before the bill was finalised, however, and it never came into effect as the Home Rule process was postponed to the end of the war.

6. Single transferable vote in the Sligo Corporation Act 1918.

In July 1918 the House of Commons passed a bill inserting an STV election vote system for the Irish town of Sligo. The election was held in January 1919 and it was the first popular election to use a PR system in Britain or Ireland. The local authority had asked for this amendment to solve their internal crisis which arose since the protestant minority was unrepresented on the council. The election proved to be a huge success. The turnout was 80% and the results thought to be fair.

7. Single transferable vote in the Representation of the People Act 1918.

By the Fourth Reform Act in 1918 the suffrage was extended to all male and females over the age of 30. The significance of this enfranchisement is best emphasized by the fact that the electorate tripled. There was surprisingly a provision in the act for PR election in the form of STV which survived the fierce debates in parliament. Universities had formed a few constituencies and voted members to the House of Commons since the early 17th century. They were restructured into four constituencies with the STV method of voting (Pugh, 1978). These were the first and until now the only seats in the Commons to be elected using PR. These special University constituencies were abolished in 1950.

8. Single transferable vote in the Irish Local Government Act 1919.

The success in Sligo inspired several Irish local authorities to pass resolutions in favour of proportional representation. The British government then acted promptly and introduced a bill applying the STV system to all Irish local elections. The Local Government Act was passed in June 1919.

9. Single transferable vote in the Government of Ireland Act 1920.

The British government returned to the implementation of Home Rule for Ireland once World War I was over. The solution was to divide the country into two parts each one having its own parliament, made up of a Senate and a House of Commons. The members were to be elected according to the STV election system. This was an obvious proposition to make in the light of preceding legislations in 1914 and 1919 and the strong support for PR from the Irish themselves. Two years later the southern part of Ireland became independent and proportional representation was included in the constitution of the Free Irish State. A proposal to substitute FPTP system for PR has twice been put to the people of Eire in a referendum, and twice been rejected, in 1959 and 1968. In Northern Ireland the PR system was in effect in the elections in

1921 and 1925, but the Unionists rejected it and in the 1929 election FPTP was substituted for the PR system. PR had been thrown out in local elections even earlier in 1922.

10. Single transferable vote in the South Africa Act 1909. Representation of the People Act 1918.

The British parliament passed an act which created a Senate for South Africa and decided that half of its seats would be elected by the single transferable vote. The electorate was restricted to members of the four Provincial Councils and the House of Assembly, the lower house of its parliament.

1.3. Majority of the Liberal Party for proportional representation 1916 - 1924.

In 1906 the Liberal Party won a landslide victory and got a majority of 397 seats out of 670 in the House of Commons on just 49% of the vote. The party would probably have had to depend on the Irish for a majority had there then been a proportional representation system. The Liberal Party was a party of government as Bogdanor (2007) argues, and therefore it is no surprise that the party's leaders were rather hostile to PR. Ahead of the party was a period of 16 consecutive years in power with its leaders serving as prime ministers. Under these circumstances a PR selection system seemed to be a way to relinquish the party's grip on power while the FPTP in single-member seats was on the other hand clearly in favour of a two-party system and likely to fend off any insurgence from the growing Labour Party. This practical reality collided with the traditional substantial support from liberal politicians for a fair election system with an equal value of the vote. There was thus always considerable support for a PR system within the party's ranks, among them a long row of leading activists stretching back through Lord Courtney to John Stuart Mill. PR was considered necessary to accomplish a full democratic franchise (Pugh, 1978: 12). The war coalition had to address the franchise issue as only about 60% of men were eligible to vote and no women. It was foreseeable that after the War the suffrage would be universal and the number of electors would rise dramatically. In 1916-17, an all-party Speaker's conference agreed unanimously to a PR system, STV, in all boroughs which returned three or more MPs. This appeared to apply to 211 seats in Great Britain out of a total 569 (Hart, 1992: 183). It seems clear from the debate in parliament that fears of mass Labour voters in populous boroughs moved some members of the conference to support PR in these constituencies. The cabinet did not support this amendment but it was included in the government's bill in 1917 which made the suffrage almost universal for both sexes (the Representation of the People Bill), and left to a free vote

in parliament. The recommendation was rejected by 169 to 201 votes in the Commons (White, 2011). Instead the Commons agreed by 125 to 124 to introduce the Alternative Vote for single member constituencies. The Lords rejected AV and reinstated STV three times, but their proposals were always turned down in the Commons which reinstated the AV. The deadlock between the two houses was broken when both STV and AV were removed from the Bill. Hart believes that the Conservative Lords disagreed with their party members in the Commons and sincerely thought PR was better for the Conservatives taking a longer-term view. The majority of the Liberals voted in favour of STV and also for AV (White, 2011). The majority of Liberal MPs in 1918 was without doubt openly supporting PR in spite of their leaders' hostile stand. This trend was confirmed in the House of Commons in 1923 when a Liberal MP moved for giving the local authorities the option of being elected by PR. Similar proposals had been passed in the House of Lords three times in the preceding years. The bill was narrowly defeated on a free vote by 169 votes to 157, a majority of the Liberals in favour. The PR agenda had been on Asquith's 1922 manifesto of the divided Liberal Party, but not it was not on the 1923 manifesto of the reunited party. Finally in 1924, the introduction of a PR system became a party policy. It was on the 1924 election manifesto and earlier that same year in parliament that Rendall, a Liberal MP, proposed a bill providing for PR in parliamentary elections. The bill was soundly beaten 238 to 144, but all Liberal MPs but one supported it. The party was now at last united on this vital issue. In the general election in October 1924 the party lost ground and was heavily defeated by Labour and the Conservatives. Its share of the vote plunged to 17.6% and a mere 40 MPs. The election system FPTP served its purpose and favoured a two-party system as before. But now the Liberals were on the receiving end of the system's faults and were voted out of any hope of power. The party did recover in votes in the 1929 elections, receiving 23.4%, but gaining only 59 seats. The days of the Liberals as a political power force were over for a long period of time.

2. The Progress and success of PR in British popular elections since 1924.

2.1. Liberals fail twice to exploit key position in a hung parliament.

The 1929 election did not provide any of the parties with a majority in the Commons. Labour formed a minority government and the Liberals tried to exploit the situation to press for a PR election system. Labour was now in power and benefiting from the severe split in Liberal ranks. They had certainly realised that the FPTP system was the principal tool to oust Liberals

from power and secure Labour their place for the future. Soon the Liberals realised (Hart, 239) that Labour would never agree on PR but for the offered AV. The Liberals did not succeed in reaching agreement with the Conservatives on the issue and form a government although there was some interest among the Tories to adopt PR to some extent, thus settling for AV without any enthusiasm. The administration's bill on AV passed through the Commons but the international financial crisis hit the nation and the reform electoral bill vanished in parliament. The Liberals had failed totally in their effort to improve the electoral system and came out empty handed. Hart argues (Hart, 1992, 245-46) that Liberals could have obtained the alternative vote had they demanded legislation on it at the beginning and she thinks that the Liberals would have benefited from AV. Hart's explanation is that the Liberals did not want to support the Labour government on condition for electoral reform as they wanted to operate freely on other issues.

For the next four decades PR election reform was practically without support outside the Liberal ranks. Both Conservatives and Labour opposed any changes to the FPTP system and two Speaker's Conferences, one in 1944 and the other 1965-7, simply confirmed this stand. The arguments from both of these parties stated that the purpose of the existing system was to choose between two strong parties and produce a strong one-party government and that was just a fact of life which other parties had to accept.

Another opportunity arrived late in 1976 when James Callaghan's Labour government lost its overall majority in the Commons and needed support. The Liberals' new leader David Steel wanted to prove that his party was prepared for the responsibility of power. An arrangement was made between the two parties which was to last for the next 18 months until August 1978. The Liberals prioritised a few issues and electoral reform was of course one of them. The parties agreed to propose in the Commons PR elections for the devolved bodies in Scotland and Wales and for direct elections to the European Parliament. However, Labour promised little and the votes were to be free, so their MPs could oppose the proposals at will. The outcome went accordingly, for the vote on the European Parliament was lost 319:222 as 122 Labour MPs voted against it. The PR for the assemblies was defeated in the House of Lords by Labour peers. The Lib-Lab Pact delivered nothing on electoral reforms. The Pact had from the outset been controversial within Liberal ranks and there were serious doubts about its benefits. As early as in May 1977 the party suffered a heavy defeat in local elections and lost three-quarters of its county council seats. Liberals lost ground at every parliamentary by-election during the pact and the party's Gallup poll rating fell into single figures. The party's message to Steel was clear, it supported inter-party cooperation but the promise for

electoral reform was inviolable. Cooperation had to deliver progress towards PR (Cole, 2011: 276-280). The result of these two efforts in trying to benefit from the situation in the House of Commons, were unfruitful in substance and disastrous in terms of public support. After the first hung parliament, the Liberal party was scattered in three pieces and was voted into a micro-party in with only 21 MPs. Also the second opportunity for the Liberals created only problems, as humiliating defeat was only avoided due to the delay of a general election from autumn 1978 until springtime 1979. The party had been heavily under-represented in Parliament in proportion to its share of the votes in almost all elections since 1922. The party's adherents wanted the continuous injustice resulting from the election system to be corrected and were not willing to keep in power either of the responsible parties without direct improvement towards PR.

2.2. Electoral reform again on the agenda in the 1970s and the Liberal revival.

In the 1970s a series of incidents brought electoral reform back onto on the political agenda. Since the 1960s there had been a growing demand for devolution within Britain. Both in Wales and Scotland there were nationalistic parties receiving growing support in elections. The government appointed a Royal Commission (the Kilbrandon Commission) which recommended in 1973 regional assemblies in Scotland and Wales to be elected by STV except for single-member constituencies with AV in the most rural areas. The Labour administration did not support these proposals for the election system and stuck to the FPTP system. The 1974 two general elections altered the accepted opinion of the benefits of the FPTP electoral system. Both elections failed to produce a stable one party majority. The first one ended in a hung parliament and the second election gave Labour a tiny majority which soon evaporated into thin air. Over the next years an unstable political situation remained in times of serious economic crisis. The system had not delivered strong government, which was its main purpose according to its adherents. Added to this failure were the strikingly unjust features of the election results. The Labour party got fewer votes than the Conservatives in the February elections but outnumbered them in elected MPs. In the October elections Labour won a majority in parliament on 39% share of the votes, but the Conservatives and the Liberals received no less than 54% of the votes. Liberals did extremely well in both elections, more than doubling their 1970 share of the vote with 19% and 18% respectively, but gaining only 14 and 13 MPs. They were greatly under-represented. All this created growing doubt about the legitimacy of the FPTP system. It should also be mentioned that there was a rise in the voting share of parties other than the two large ones, Labour and Conservative. In the

1955 election they received 96% of the vote, but in 1974 their share was down to 75%. In spite of this decline in support, Labour and Conservatives still got 95% of the seats in parliament. Parties supporting devolution were increasing their popular support. This applies to the Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru in Wales and the Liberals who were strongly in favour of decentralisation and federalism. Liberals wanted to go further in devolution than the Kilbrandon Commission suggested (Deacon, 2009: 89). There are other explanations for the revival of the Liberal party in 1974 such as their moderate opinion and willingness to work with anyone in times of class conflict and growing extremism in politics (Cole, 2009: 265, and Hickson, 2009: 110). There is a third explanation for a growing interest in the PR electoral system in the 1970s alongside the two aforementioned reasons: the flaws of the FPTP system in the 1974 elections and a demand for devolution. In 1973 the United Kingdom joined the European Economic Community, later EU, and it needed to be decided by what electoral method the British representatives for the European parliament should be elected. It was of course noted that every other member nation used a PR system or the second ballot. The Commons decided overwhelmingly in December 1977 to stick to the existing FPTP system, except in Northern Ireland. There STV was used as an appropriate method to reconcile the rival Catholics and Protestants. As could be foreseen the MEP elections under this system were extremely unfair and disproportionate and excluded parties with considerable voters' support. In the first three elections only two parties, the Conservatives and the Labour shared between them all the 81 MEPs, in spite of the fact that other parties received substantial support from the voters. The Liberal Party got 13% of the votes in 1979, the Alliance of the Liberal Party and the newly founded Social Democratic Party received 20% in the 1984 election and the Greens 15% in 1989. It is amazing that 2.6 million voter who supported the Alliance in 1984 were totally unrepresented in the European parliament. This was observed by other EU member nations who questioned this electoral system.

2.3. From Liberal Party to Liberal Democrats 1979 – 1988.

It is necessary to give a short account of a transformation of the Liberal Party into a new party, the Liberal Democrats in March 1988. After the defeat in the 1979 general election there was unrest in the Labour Party. Some of the party's prominent members even held the opinion that the party was not electable. One was Roy Jenkins, then President of the European Commission. He had previously been an MP, a minister for the party and deputy leader. He contested the leadership of the Labour Party in 1976 but came third out of six. Jenkins decided to leave Parliament and was appointed to the European presidency in 1977. Matthew

Cole has written on the events leading up to the founding of the Liberal Democrats and reveals that within weeks of the 1979 election Jenkins approached David Steel, the leader of the Liberal Party. They agreed, according to Steel, on a strategy to break the mould of British politics. Their plan was to form an organisation, consisting mainly of defected Labour members, which would side with the Liberals in an alliance. Later, in November that year Jenkins gave his famous BBC Dimbleby Lecture. Its title was taken from Robert's Browning poem "Home Thoughts from Abroad" in which he referred to patriotic feelings towards England and analysed its continuous unsound economic performance as a failure of adaptability and problems due to the two-party system. Jenkins advocated a new radical centre and called for a political regrouping. He believed that electoral reforms were vital, especially the introduction of proportional representation as the present first-past-the-post system in Britain stood in the way of changes in politics. In his speech Jenkins said:

I believe that the case for proportional representation is overwhelming. It is clearly a fairer system, accepted as such by the great majority of democratic countries. The onus of proof must be upon those who wish to defend the existing system, under which you give only a handful of parliamentary seats to 20 per cent, or even 25 per cent, of the electorate. And, as there is a greater alienation from the two big parties, it has become more indefensible. And as it becomes more indefensible, so the alienation feeds upon itself. (Jenkins, 1998)

These views were totally in line with the Liberal Party's policy and were adopted in the manifesto of the Alliance in 1981 between the new Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the Liberal Party. But Roy Jenkins was yet to make another contribution to the course of electoral reforms when Labour returned to power.

The Alliance lasted for seven years and made advances in two general elections in 1983 and 1987 with 25% and 23% of the vote respectively. It was the highest poll of any third party since the 1923 election. But the electoral system deprived the Alliance of its share of the MPs as it got only 3-4% of the seats. The process of forming a new centre in British politics was finalized in March 1988 when the Liberal Democratic Party was founded. Paddy Ashdown was elected as the party's first leader. Duncan Brack states that "the Liberal Democrats were effectively a modernised Liberal Party with a policy platform built around Liberalism" (Brack, 2011: 313).

2.4. Realignment to the left 1992 – 1997 and agreement on constitutional reform.

The new Liberal Democrat Party established itself in the 1992 elections polling 18% but winning only 3% of the seats. The question then was what strategy to adopt. Ashdown's

policy was clear; he followed in the footsteps of earlier Liberal leaders and headed for realignment to the left. He argued that only the division between Labour and the Liberal Democrats gave the Conservatives the opportunity to gain power and keep it with a minority of votes (Brack, 2011: 317). This was particularly obvious in 1992 when the Conservatives had won four consecutive elections although never polling higher than 44%. Ashdown openly declared for his plan in the so-called Chard speech to create a non-socialist alternative to the Conservatives and called for an electoral reform commission and for the Labour Party, amongst other issues, to be more open to constitutional reform. There was little response from Labour until 1994 when Blair became the party leader. He was influenced by Robin Cook and Peter Mandelson who were open to consider an alliance of some sort with the Liberals. The Labour leaders must have been devastated by the fourth successive loss in the general elections. Especially unexpected was John Major's victory in 1992. This repeated failure of the Labour party created an opportunity for an alignment of the left between the Liberals and Labour. Blair realised that he had to move the Labour party towards the centre and make it more electable in the eyes of the voters. He probably had only one chance to bring Labour back to power. If he failed in the next election the party would almost certainly find another leader. An alliance with the Liberals was therefore an attractive option for Blair. The two party leaders started collaborating in September 1994 as to how they best could work together to expel the Conservatives and produce an election victory, and thereafter implementing their own joint policies. Constitutional reform was one of the key issues. A group led by Cook for Labour and MacLennan for the Liberals reached agreement on various proposals in March 1997. Among the suggestions were devolution in Scotland and Wales, proportional representation for elections to the new devolved bodies and for European elections. There should also be an elected authority for London and likewise a PR election system for it. Finally a referendum on voting reform for Westminster elections was proposed with a choice between the existing FPTP system and a PR alternative. These proposals were certainly liberal in substance and new for Labour. Brack assumes (2011: 321) that the purpose of the agreement was not only to make a compromise with the Liberals but also to modernise the Labour Party. Missing from the agreement was the Liberals most wanted proposal, PR electoral reform for Westminster elections, and it soon became clear that Labour drew the line there which Blair refused to cross.

The 1997 election saw Labour win a landslide victory which destroyed any argument for a coalition government between Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Despite Labour's good fortunes the Liberals did better than ever since 1929 winning 46 seats, thanks partly to a

secret but formal cooperation between the two opposition parties. Ashdown had played his cards well. The Liberal Democrats received 17% of the votes and the highest number of seats in Parliament for seven decades. The Liberals also had a formal agreement with the incoming party which proposed many of the Liberals' constitutional reforms. Although Liberal Democrats were not in government the party was hardly in direct opposition on several important issues. The next challenge was to ensure the implementation of the agreement.

2.5. Proportional representation at last in British elections.

After the elections Liberals prioritized the Cook-Maclennan Agreement. A joint Cabinet Committee on constitutional reform was established with five members from each party. Devolution in Scotland and Wales was accepted in a referendum. Acts establishing a parliament in Scotland and an assembly in Wales were passed in 1998 and the first elections were held in 1999. The election system for the European parliament was changed from FPTP in 1999 after stubborn resistance in the House of Lords which rejected the bill six times but was finally overruled by the Commons. The same year, acts were passed for a directly elected mayor in London. In 2000 the local government act provided the option for further direct election of mayors in England and Wales. Three different election systems were chosen for these elected bodies and first-past-the-post was rejected in every case. A closed party lists system was chosen for the European elections, except in Northern Ireland which kept its STV system established in 1977. The United Kingdom was divided into 12 multi-member electoral regions, 9 in England and one in each of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. For the devolved bodies, a mixed system of FPTP and a closed party list system is in use called additional member system (AMS). The voters have two votes, one for the single-member constituency they are registered in using FPTP and the second vote for selecting a party in a region. (The Electoral Commission, Oct 2011). The supplementary system was decided for the mayoral elections. The voter ranks two of the candidates as No. 1 and No. 2 according to his preference. This is in fact the alternative vote system with preferences restricted to only two. If no candidate receives a majority of the votes as the first preference then all but the two candidates with the highest share of the votes are eliminated. Then the votes of the eliminated candidates are counted for their second preferences and any cast for the two remaining are transferred.

The Liberals main objective was to introduce a PR system for Westminster elections. Ashdown pushed for a decision on a referendum as Labour had promised. In December 1997 the independent commission on voting reform was launched, chaired by Roy Jenkins. Its

mandate was explained by the Secretary of State for Home Department, Jack Straw in the House of Commons in this way:

The Commission shall be free to consider and recommend any appropriate system or combination of systems in recommending an alternative to the present system for Parliamentary elections to be put before the people in the Government's referendum.

The commission shall observe the requirement for broad proportionality, the need for stable government, an extension of voter choice and the maintenance of a link between hon. Members and geographical constituencies. The Commission will begin its work early in the new year and has been asked to report within twelve months. (Jenkins Report, 1998: 18)

On 29 October 1998 the report was published. It recommended an alternative vote system and open list party system called AV+ or AV Top. It stipulated that 80-85% of the House of Commons were to be elected in a single member constituency by AV system. To correct to some extent the disproportionality some 15-20% of the MPs would be elected through lists using areas based on city or county boundaries (Top-up). The list would be open and only with a couple names submitted by each party. Voters would have two votes, for the constituency and one the Top-up, therefore allowing for split ticket voting (Jenkins Report, 1998).

The Liberals decided to support the Jenkins recommendations but Labour did not and the referendum was never held. Ashdown had failed in his main objective and determined to resign from the leadership in January 1999. Before a new leader was elected in August, elections to the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the European Parliament according to the new proportional election systems were held. The irony of these events is that they exhibit greater success than ever before in achieving a proportional election system but Ashdown's resignation focused on the one aim not achieved. Ashdown had helped his party to achieve more than ever before but stepped down nonetheless.

There are now five different election systems used for public elections in Britain and three of them are proportional. First-past-the-post is used for Westminster elections and local elections in England and Wales. The supplementary vote is used to elect the Mayor of London and other elected mayors in England and Wales. The Single Transferable Vote system requires multi-member constituencies and is used for electing the Northern Ireland Assembly, local elections in Scotland and Northern Ireland and European and Northern Ireland parliamentary elections and members of the Scottish parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the London Assembly are elected by the additional member system. Finally a closed party list system is used to elect member of the European Parliament with the

exception of Northern Ireland. There is no doubt that the first-past-the-post system is on the back foot. The system only prevails as the preferred system for the whole of the island of Albion in the Westminster elections and has been totally rejected in the U.K. in the elections to the European Parliament. This has changed completely over the last 40 years.

2.6. The prevailing unfairness and disproportionateness of the present system.

There is of course a reason for the decline of the support for the first-past-the-post system. The fact is, as is pointed out in the British Academy report “Choosing an Electoral System” (2010), that the FPTP electoral system is first and foremost designed for a two party system. With two dominant parties it tends to produce a clear governing majority for the winning party and a fairly good correspondence between the vote-share and the parliamentary seats. Once this prerequisite breaks down so does the election system. There are several serious flaws in the system resulting in mismatching the outcome of the elections and the intention of the voters.

First is the continuous declining share of the votes of the two main parties. In 1951 they received 97% but this went down to 65% in 2010. Only in one election since 1970 has the combined vote-share of these two parties exceeded 80%. In 2010 the two main parties held 87% of the seats on 65% of the vote-share. A third of the voters determine only 13% of the seats. Second, the electoral battle between Labour and Conservative candidates was only in half of the constituencies, and in the other half there was a third party rivalling either a Labour or Conservative candidate. In some seats it was a three-way or even a four-way contest.

The Electoral Reform Society’s report on the UK 2010 general election (2010) also mentions these same two points and adds information to the second one demonstrating the divergence of the parties’ support creating strongholds and electoral deserts where substantial minorities of voters are hardly represented. Examples of this extreme under-representation are the Conservatives in Scotland and Labour in Eastern England, and then conversely the over-representation of Labour in the north of England and in Scotland. Liberal Democrats polling 23% won only 9% of the seats with the mismatch most striking in England. The third comment is presented in the Electoral Reform Society’s report and is in a way a consequence of the differently diverging voting pattern by regions. The number of safe seats is astonishingly high. Only about 200 seats out of the total 650 were seriously contested between the parties and the results of the elections were decided in those constituencies. The others were safe seats. Another worrying feature is the lack of support for the elected MP. No less

than 433 out of 650 MP were elected by a minority of their own voters, an all-time high. This means that the link between constituency and MP has changed and is undermining the highly praised advantage of the FPTP system. Another striking fact of the recent electoral outcome draws attention to the faults of the FPTP system. The majority of the votes, 53%, were cast for losing candidates and did not contribute to electing MPs. These voters were in reality deprived of their franchise, every man and woman's basic right. There must be serious question marks raised over the democracy of such a system. Finally the turnout has declined substantially over the last 15 years. It was 71% in 1997, fell to 59% in 2001, rose a little to 61% in 2005 and to 65% in the last election. The drop is about 10-15% compared to the 1970s. Amongst the youngest voter-group it is estimated that more than 45% did not vote and the ratio is also high, 30%, for 35-44 years old (UK Political Info). The British Academy summarised its report with the observation that "if voting patterns across constituencies continue to diverge, it will become difficult for either of the two main parties to win a clear parliamentary majority with support in the 35-40% range." The electoral system is not producing stable governments and definitely not delivering the voters intention. On the contrary it is preventing their and implementation the interests of the Labour and Conservative parties.

3. The prospects for further changes during the Coalition government.

3.1. The Coalition Agreement 2010.

The 2010 parliamentary election produced what was inevitable in the near future, the hung parliament in which no party has a majority in the House of Commons. The Liberal Democrats were in a key position as the two-party system is founded on the notion of constantly opposing parties which never share power. Any coalition between the Conservatives and Labour is therefore unthinkable. For the Liberals, however the outcome of the general election was far from ideal. In terms of values and policies the party is closer to Labour than to the Conservatives as history reveals. But these two parties did not win a combined majority in the Commons. That created difficulties and even though additional support could be sought from smaller parties, the Labour-Liberal government would always be more fragile than the other option which was forming a clear majority government with the Conservatives. Historically the Liberals should expect a better compromise with Labour on their electoral reform and constitutional agenda, but this time it seemed to be otherwise. The Liberals decided that the Conservatives offered a better deal. When the negotiations took

place in the days following the election, news broke out that Labour had offered immediate AV legislation and a referendum on a proportional representation system. But this was not confirmed and Cowley and Ryder (2011: 361) state firmly that it was not offered. At least the outcome was a coalition between the Liberals and the Conservatives.

The coalition agreement has four points on the subject of electoral reform of which three are explicitly concerned with the value of the vote. The first issue is the referendum on an AV system for Westminster elections. The drawback was of course that the Conservative did not support the alternative vote and it was clear from the beginning that they would fight against any approval of it. The second vital point is the government's pledge to create more equal-sized constituencies. The MPs seats will be reduced from 650 to 600 and the constituency boundaries redrawn. Thirdly, there is the long-awaited reform of the House of the Lords. This is of some significance, as the coalition pledges to transform the Lords to an upper chamber which will be wholly or mainly elected on the basis of proportional representation. This is in fact a very radical proposition. The last item of electoral reform is the introduction of recall, allowing voters to force a bye-election and oust their MP. This is not the Liberals' ultimate goal of PR, but some considerable steps towards it, nonetheless. The controversial part of this agreement for the Liberals is the AV, as the alternative vote is not a PR system and might even later hinder PR once it has been implemented. Another danger is looming which the Liberals need to be aware of. If the government does not fulfil the reforms it agrees on, the Liberal Democrats will find life particularly difficult in the next general election.

The referendum on AV was held on 5 May 2011. The proposition was overwhelmingly rejected. 68% of voters opposed changing the voting system to AV and only 32% were in favour. The No vote was in the majority in every UK region. Out of 440 vote counting areas, the No vote was in the majority in 430. Of the 10 areas that had a majority of Yes votes, 6 were in London. The turnout was 42% (White, 2011). This is striking bearing in mind that the AV was leading in the polls from the start in May 2010 until as late as March 2011. Only in the last few weeks did the voters reject the electoral change.

The stunning result requires explanations. Why was the subject of a referendum, which originally had a 27% lead in opinion polls, still lose in the end with a 36% difference in the vote? Qvortrup (2011) has examined this and his conclusion, in short, is that even though the voters were in favour of the topic, the Yes-campaign lost because the No side managed to change the agenda and capture the median-voter. The referendum was turned into a vote of no confidence in the leader of the Liberal Democrats Nick Clegg by using the unpopular raising

of university tuition fees. The No side also focused on the cost and claimed that it would be high and instead of spending the money on electoral reform it could pay for doctors, operations and school places. Qvortrup points out that more than 150 Labour MPs turned against AV and only 50 voted in favour of it, in spite of the party's allegiance towards it before the general election. He also finds in his observation that worldwide since 1980 fifty electoral system changes have been proposed without a referendum and all been passed but one. Referendums were held for 19 changes, nine of which were successful and ten unsuccessful. He states that in general public enthusiasm for electoral reform is not great. This means obviously that when there is a lack of enthusiasm for a proposition and a fierce opposition then winning a referendum is a hard task.

The other two reform issues are still on course. Legislation to reduce the number of MPs' seats and redraw the boundaries has been passed, but Parliament has yet to complete it. When it comes to the MPs own seats, no changes should be taken for granted until they are done but there are no evidence yet that this reform will fail. The radical reform of mainly electing the House of Lords should be sailing through the two Houses more or less in untroubled waters bearing in mind the three main parties agenda before the 2010 election (Electoral Reform Society, 2012). The Joint Committee of the two Houses has recently published its proposals (www.parliament.uk). Their proposals follow the Coalition agreement in broad terms, advocating a mostly elected House and, most importantly, a PR election system based on 5-7-member constituencies with a floor of three seats in a district. The government supported STV but the committee is backing an "open preferential voting system", used in Australia, which allows voters to choose whether to vote for the list of candidates compiled by the parties or to choose between the candidates by ranking them in personal order of preference. In the Lords draft paper there is an interesting argument for PR in Chapter 3 (124):

A majority agreed with the Government's proposal to use a form of proportional representation for elections to the House of Lords. A proportional system will best preserve the independence and political diversity of the current House of Lords and ensure that it retains a different character from that of the House of Commons. It is less likely to lead to elected members challenging the link between MPs and their constituents. We consider these issues in more detail below. Most importantly, however, it makes it unlikely that any one party will achieve and maintain a majority in the upper chamber.

With this argumentation, the majority of the Joint Committee is for the first time stating that PR should be used for a part of the legislative body to ensure independence of the elected, to promote political diversity, and finally, most astoundingly, to prevent a majority in the upper chamber.

But there are some clouds gathering in the clear sky. There is a growing unrest in the Conservative Party against the reform plans of the Lords, and the Joint Committee has proposed a referendum on the proposals. As was experienced in the AV referendum nothing can be taken for granted about the outcome. The Liberal Democrats have good reason to avoid a referendum and should hold the Conservatives to the Coalition Agreement and implement the reforms by legislation only. The fact is the Liberals have not achieved anything yet of the agreed electoral reform and the party has to stay firm and keep its ground. The Conservative Party is the least willing party when it comes to electoral reforms.

3.2. Conclusion and prospects.

It is an indisputable, although not quite so evident a fact, that the first-past-the-post system is in retreat. Over the last decades it has not been introduced anywhere in Britain in new areas for elections and the popular vote. On the contrary, the proportional representation system has been legislated for in more and more elections, first in Ireland, then in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland, and then in regional parliamentary and local elections. Finally it has been introduced in elections in England itself, for the European Parliament and the London Assembly. The only prevailing fortresses of FPTP are the Westminster and local elections in England and Wales. Even there their defence is weakening, as the Joint Committee is making concessions to PR in the House of Lords, which is inside the Westminster borders. It is not a question of *if* but *when* there will be further electoral reform in Britain. Adrian Blau (2006) has studied this subject and predicted what type of reform could most likely be passed through the House of Commons. Blau observes that reform is possible, though still unlikely, due to four interrelated developments that have weakened the Single Member Plurality (SMP) which is another name for the FPTP system. These four reasons are: a decline in responsiveness which exaggerates the winning parties' share of parliamentary seats; the rise in minor-party seats to 13-14%, making hung parliaments more likely; the governing parties have become less cohesive; and finally, a very large pro-Labour partisan bias in seats especially since 1992. As Blau predicted, the will of the two parties to reform the electoral system remained minimal in 2010 in spite of the elections ending in a hung parliament. But this could also be the result of some of the future elections as well, with an extreme Labour-biased number of

parliamentary seats in between. The instability of the system will only increase when taking into account the reasons for it. Blau predicts that the only reforms possible, as he estimated the situation then, are the AV or even the AV+. Now that AV has been set aside, only the combination of FPTP, whether amended with preference voting or not, and multi-member constituencies with the STV system remain on the table. The result of the next general elections will decide the speed of further reforms but they will come sooner or later. The existing system deprives too many voters of their influence to be tolerated. The defenders of the FPTP are mainly the leaders of the two main parties and to some extent the MPs. They have given up bit by bit the FPTP system, first furthest away from Westminster, and now only clinging on there. Devolution and social change will claim more and more power out of their hands.

The Liberals founded their policy on an electoral system when the party and its leaders were free of the corruptive effect of power. Liberal persistence on the issue has had considerable impact which is underestimated. The Liberal policy has been implemented to a large extent. This is not all due to their direct efforts, but the party kept pushing the policy, publicised it and fighting for it. As Matthew Cole reminds us in his chapter on constitutional reform, the Liberals constant pursuit of of electoral reform has resulted in elections at all levels other than at Westminster now using systems with varying degrees of proportional representation. “This is an achievement with which any post-war Liberal would have been pleased” (Cole, 2009: 72)

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