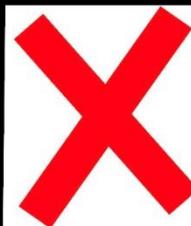


## 12th December 2019: Our Victorian Voting System strikes again...

*Over 300 candidates were stood down by parties to avoid splitting the vote and polls indicate that nearly 1 in 5 voters voted tactically rather than support their preferred candidate, and yet millions of votes were wasted.*

# Something's wrong with our voting system!



*There is no greater gamble on earth than a British general election"*  
*James Middleton, Secretary of the Labour Party 1936*

The 2019 General Election results indicate that our antiquated "First-past-the-post" voting system is not fit for purpose. Signing away your democratic rights with the mark of illiteracy in single member constituencies enables MPs to be elected on a small fraction of the vote. In this election, one third of the MPs were elected on a minority of the vote. This means that the votes of millions of voters will have counted for nothing. Moreover, seats won by a party do not necessarily reflect the level of support nationwide for that party, nor are outcomes consistent or certain; votes determine the result of an election according to where they are cast, not for whom they are cast. Because of this, it is possible for a party to win the most seats nationwide with a minority of the vote. In this election, Boris Johnson's so-called landslide was achieved on just 44% of the vote; 56% of those who voted did not support his party.

First-past-the-post has also weakened the Union by distorting the results in favour of the nationalist parties. North of the Border, the Scottish Nationalists took 81% of the seats for just 45% of the vote, while in Northern Ireland, Unionists were awarded fewer seats than the Nationalists, even though they had polled more votes.

The following table summarizes the UK's general election results since 2005, with some of the major disparities highlighted:-

	2005		2010		2015		2017		2019	
	%Votes	%Seats								
Con	32.3	30.6	36.1	47.2	36.9	50.9	42.4	48.9	43.6	56.2
Labour	35.3	55.1	29.0	39.7	30.4	35.7	40.0	40.3	32.2	31.2
LibDem	22.1	9.6	23.0	8.8	7.9	1.2	7.4	1.8	11.5	1.7
UKIP	2.2	0	3.1	0	12.6	0.1	1.8	0	0.1	0.0
Brexit									2.0	0.0
Green	1.0	0	1.0	0.1	3.8	0.1	1.6	0.1	2.7	0.1

Note in particular how our outdated voting system gave Labour 55% of the seats and absolute power with just 35% of the vote in 2005 and how, ten years later, the Conservatives were able to form a majority government on just under 37% of the vote.

And that's just the half of it: First-past-the-post wastes a phenomenal number of votes: 45% of all the votes cast in the 2019 General Election were for losing candidates, and a further 26% of the vote was ineffectively piled up as majorities which were surplus to the winning candidates' requirements. This means that our voting system is only 29% efficient.

There is no rhyme or reason to First-past-the-post. You might as well throw dice. But why is this, exactly? This website endeavours to take you through the mechanical deficiencies of First-past-the-post and show how a new way of voting would uprate the efficiency of our voting apparatus.

## What's wrong with the UK's voting system?

Once you know how the voting system works, you will understand why it's misfiring.

To begin with, we may call it a general election but in truth there are 650 separate "stand-alone" elections held on the same day, one in every local constituency, each electing one Member of Parliament who invariably belongs to a political party. The voters in each constituency put an X alongside the name of their favoured candidate on their ballot paper and the constituency's Member of Parliament is the candidate with the most votes. The party with the most MPs wins the election and forms the government. Simple!

But there's a problem with our Victorian "First-past-the-post" voting system. It still works of a fashion, but it has never been very efficient, wasting huge numbers of votes shovelled into it and producing a rather rough end result. Moreover, this wheezing contraption has never been modified to accommodate the greater political sophistication of today's voters who are more educated, less deferential & trusting, better informed and more eclectic in their politics than they were a century ago.

What is most noticeable, however, is that seats won by a party do not necessarily reflect the level of support for that party, nor are outcomes consistent or certain, as can be seen from the table on page 1.

So, let's take a look under the bonnet to see what's wrong and what can be done to put things right.

### Blues v Reds- and then Yellows, Greens and Purples!

Up until some time after the last war, consumer choice for the man in the street was very limited in everything from holidays to hoovers - and politics. In the Sheffield Hallam constituency of 1955, for example, voters there had a choice of just two candidates in that year's general election. The result was as follows:-

Roland Jennings	Conservative&NatLib	30,069 votes	66.2%
James Marsden	Labour	15,330 votes	33.8%

In individual constituencies up and down the land in 1955, most voters were offered similar meagre choice but at least Mr Jennings's victory was clear-cut with the support of two thirds of those who voted in his constituency. However, let us fast-forward 64 years to the 2019 General Election result in Sheffield Hallam which showed a very different picture:-

Olivia Blake	Labour	19,709 votes	34.6%
Laura Gordon	Liberal Democrat	18,997 votes	33.4%
Ian Walker	Conservative	14,696 votes	25.8%
Natalie Thomas	Green	1,630 votes	2.9%
Terence McHale	Brexit	1,562 votes	2.7%
Michael Virgo	UKIP	168 votes	0.3%
Elizabeth Aspden	Independent	123 votes	0.2%

The number of candidates there mushroomed to seven, reflecting the profusion of parties that have sprung up over the decades; there are now about 350 registered with the Electoral Commission. Even so, while the UK has changed beyond recognition in so many ways since 1955, we are still using the same old Victorian voting system to elect our national government and clearly it can no longer cope with the increased number of parties in the Premier League of British politics, as the available vote splinters into smaller and smaller shards within the confines of a single member constituency. As a result, Sheffield Hallam's Labour candidate squeaked in with the support of only 34.6% of those who voted.

### **Our voting system is only 29% efficient!**

When you go to the polls for a general election, you have just one vote which is counted only for your constituency's contest. It does not otherwise influence the national result; it is not added to any national total for the party of your choice. So, if you were a Green voter in Sheffield Hallam in 2019, yours was one of the 65.4% of the votes cast there that had no effect on the result, nationally or locally.

Is this typical? Yes, it is; in the 2019 General Election, one third of the MPs were elected on a minority of their constituency vote. Moreover, we mustn't forget that there are many other places, known as "safe seats", where the result is a forgone conclusion, like in Liverpool Walton, where Labour's Dan Carden won with a massive 84.68% of the vote in 2019. As impressive as his majority of 30,520 votes had been, they were surplus to his requirements, they didn't count in any national tally, and so represented wasted votes of a different kind.

It has been calculated that 45% of all the votes cast in the 2019 General Election were for losing candidates and a further 26% cast were surplus to the winners' requirements, which means that only 29% of the votes cast were effective. In the 2015 election, this efficiency rating was even worse, at 26%.

### **650 lotteries to elect a government!**

Considering the results in Sheffield Hallam, Liverpool Walton and all the others in between, it seems more by good luck than good management that past governments have in any way reflected the national vote for parties in a general election, which any man in the street would suppose should determine the outcome. Two models illustrate what can happen when individual constituency results are lumped together to obtain a national result.

Albion City Model Election	Red Party Votes	Blue Party Votes
Albion North Constituency	15,000	18,000
Albion Central Constituency	29,000	4,000
Albion South Constituency	16,000	17,000
<b>Total Votes Won in Albion</b>	<b>60,000</b> <i>Reds win more votes..</i>	<b>39,000</b>
Total Seats Won	1	2 <i>...but Blues win more seats!</i>

The "Albion City" model above shows how our voting system can misbehave even in a straightforward 2-party contest in 3 seats. In this model, the Reds' 2 to 1 superiority across Albion in terms of votes is not matched in terms of seats because much of the support for the Reds is represented by surplus votes uselessly piled up for the Reds in Albion Central, so the Blues win more seats.

A similar mismatch actually happened in the 1951 General Election. Back then, the Liberals were a music hall joke, the nationalists were nowhere, and the Greens, UKIP, Brexit Party and the issues that spawned them had not been invented yet. It was a straightforward fight between Labour and the Conservatives but the voting system yielded the following national result:-

1951 Election	UK Votes	UK Seats
Labour	13,948,883 <i>Labour won more votes..</i>	295
Conservative	13,718,199	321 <i>...but Conservatives won more seats!</i>
Liberals & others	929,512	9

A slim majority of voters had elected to continue with the post-war Socialist project but the voting system gifted the election to the Conservatives instead.

### It gets worse....

The system's creaky enough with just two parties in contention but, once other parties join the fray, it degenerates into a game of chance, as shown in the second model, where 3 parties are contesting 3 seats.

Britannia City Model Election	Red Party Votes	Green Party Votes	Blue Party Votes
Britannia North Constituency	12,000	11,000	10,000
Britannia Central Constituency	7,000	12,000	14,000
Britannia South Constituency	13,000	11,000	9,000
<b>Total Britannia Votes</b>	<b>32,000</b> <i>Least votes...</i>	<b>34,000</b> <i>Most votes...</i>	<b>33,000</b>
Total Seats Won	2 <i>but most seats!</i>	0 <i>but no seats!</i>	1

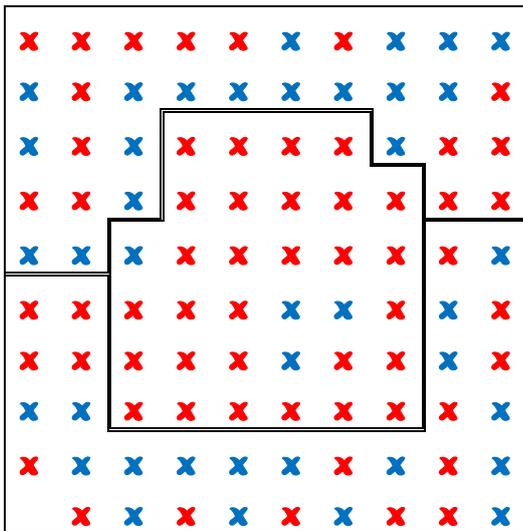
Clearly there is something very wrong with a mechanism that has the potential to give the party with the least votes the most seats and the party with the most votes no seats at all, even with exactly the same number of voters in each constituency.

# The dangers of gerrymandering

There is another structural defect of First-past-the-post as used for UK Parliamentary elections and that is the requirement that communities be chopped up into artificial single member constituencies with, as far as possible, an equal number of voters in each. This is a futile exercise which requires regular reworks to accommodate constant movement of population. The last review of UK Constituencies took place between 2000 and 2007 and a House of Commons Library report of October 2019 states that: “On average, there were 70,858 people registered to vote in parliamentary elections in constituencies in England and Wales in 2018. However, this figure hides big differences between constituencies. The smallest constituency, Arfon, had 38,864 voters, while the biggest, Isle of Wight, had 108,125.” Clearly, it is unfair and undemocratic that Arfon votes are nearly three times more powerful than those cast on the Isle of Wight.

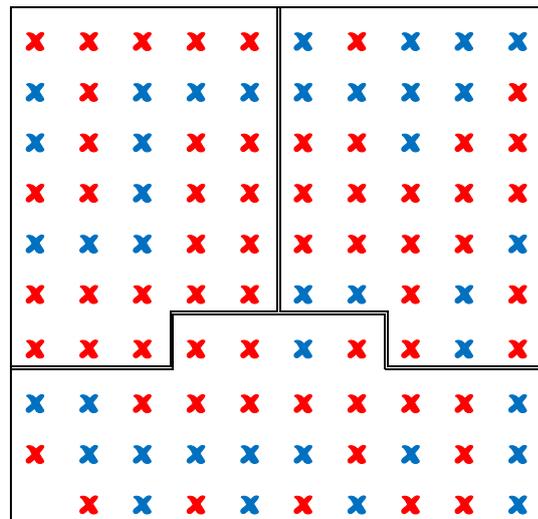
Moreover, where these boundaries are drawn can make a difference to an election result. To return to the Albion model we used earlier, the two boxes of Xs below represent the City of Albion with each X representing one thousand voters, coloured according to support for the two Red and Blue parties. The City is big enough to warrant 3 MPs so it has to be divided into 3 constituencies, each returning one MP, and the two diagrams and tables below represent two different sets of proposals and their consequences:

**Below: North, Central and South**



Albion North, Central & South	Red Votes	Blue Votes
Albion North	15,000	18,000
Albion Central	29,000	4,000
Albion South	16,000	17,000
Total Votes Won	60,000	39,000
Total Seats Won	1	2

**Below: North-West, North-East and South**



Albion North-West, North-East & South	Red Votes	Blue Votes
Albion North-West	23,000	10,000
Albion North-East	19,000	14,000
Albion South	18,000	15,000
Total Votes Won	60,000	39,000
Total Seats Won	3	0

As can be seen, it is possible to draw the Albion City boundaries in different ways so as to allow for exactly the same number of voters in each of the three constituencies. The problem is, the election results in the two configurations above are completely different; in

the first option, the Blues take the most seats with fewer votes than the Reds, while in the second opinion, they win no seats at all.

The potential for mischief is obvious and, while independent boundary commissions will use best endeavours to keep the redrawing of boundaries free from what is known as gerrymandering – manipulating boundaries for political gain – controversy is never very far away.

The Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland, for example, got themselves into a spot of bother recently while trying to redraw the province's parliamentary boundaries as part of the current UK Review; when the Commission's "Secondary Proposals" were published in 2017, the data from that year's general election results was extrapolated using the projected new boundaries in order to establish what the June 2017 result would have been with the new boundaries in place. The Democratic Unionists, having polled 36% of the vote would have taken 41% of the seats under the Commission's proposals, while Sinn Fein with 29% of the vote would have taken 53% of the seats. Understandably, the Unionists were not happy, so the Commission had another go and published some "Revised Proposals" which were then subject to the same "what if?" exercise. This revealed that, under the revised scheme, the Democratic Unionists would have won 59% of the seats while Sinn Fein would have taken 41% of the seats. It seems that everybody could vote exactly the same in exactly the same locations and yet there would be a completely different result, simply by re-drawing the single member constituency boundaries. Needless to say, the Nationalists accused the Commission of gerrymandering and of caving in to Unionist pressure.

There is a device known as "the Gerrymander Wheel" which demonstrates how altering single member constituency boundaries can affect election results in a three-party situation. This is available to view at

[https://stvact.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/gerrymander\\_wheel.pdf](https://stvact.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/gerrymander_wheel.pdf)

We need to be rid of single member constituencies.

## **First-past-the-post is bad all-round**

### **First-past-the-post is bad for national government**

The system's crucial flaw lies in the number of ineffective votes locked inside single member constituencies, either as useless surplus votes cast for the winning candidate or as wasted votes cast for losers. There is no way of utilising them in a national context or of recycling the constituency votes to obtain a more representative outcome locally. A national result can turn, not so much on how people vote, but where they live. The Power Commission of 2006 catalogued an increasing awareness among voters of this systemic waste and a realisation that general elections were yet another postcode lottery. This does not inspire confidence in, or support for, any government elected in this way.

### **First-past-the-post is bad for the Union**

Reference has already been made to the undemocratic result in Scotland where the Scottish Nationalists took 81% of the seats with just 45% of the vote in 2019, with 48 out of the 59 Scottish MPs elected on a minority of their constituency vote. As unrepresentative as the 2019 Scottish results are, the result of the 2015 general election was much more

distorted, with the ScotNats taking 95% of the Scottish seats with just 50% of the vote, thereby weakening the Union which a majority of Scottish voters had resolved should be maintained in the independence referendum the year before.

First-past-the-post has undermined the Union on a previous occasion, just over 130 years ago, when Ireland was still part of the UK. In the 1885 General Election, thanks to the use of First-past-the-post in newly created single member constituencies, Charles Parnell's Irish Parliamentary Party eliminated all shades of Unionism in the South of Ireland with just 68% of the Irish vote. Nothing could be done in Westminster afterwards without taking Mr. Parnell and his 85 MPs into account. Moreover, the pocket of unrelieved Unionism in the North East of Ireland, also elected in 1885 courtesy of First-past-the-post, laid the foundations of the conflict which still festers on the streets of Northern Ireland to this day.

While there are limits to the parallels that can be drawn between Ireland and Scotland in terms of era, culture and politics, First-past-the-post seems to have a tendency to brutalise political debate; it accentuates differences of opinion; it fuels geographical tribalism; it overstates the majority and discriminates against the minority, even to the point of eliminating it altogether. Accordingly there is a case for suggesting that our First-past-the-post voting system is contributing to the destruction of our union with Scotland in much the same way it helped destroy our union with Ireland.

### **First-past-the-post is bad for local government**

While First-past-the-post could in theory enable one political party to take every single Westminster Parliamentary seat in a 3-cornered contest with just 34% of the vote, the UK's varied demographic ensures that this remains a very remote possibility and that each general election offers the prospect of a change of government. But what is unlikely in Westminster politics is commonplace in local government. Thanks to the continued use of First-past-the-post in council elections for England and Wales, there are many examples of one-party fiefdoms who rule forever, in many cases inefficient, complacent and corruptible, being untroubled by any meaningful opposition. For example, Rotherham's Council was in the news some years ago for its systemic failure to address widespread child abuse between 1997 and 2013. During this period, the entire council was up for election in 2004 and the result was as follows:-

<b>Rotherham Council Elections 2004</b>	<b>% Votes</b>	<b>% Seats</b>
Labour	53	84
Conservative	18	11
Liberal Democrat	17	0
Independent	8	5
Others	4	0

Labour's taking 84% of the Council seats with only 53% of the vote deprived Rotherham Council of a viable opposition, which might otherwise have been more effective at holding the Labour administration to account. Notice also how the Liberal Democrats fared compared with the Conservatives.

The reason why these disparities are magnified in local government elections using First-past-the-post is because most councils are divided into multi-member wards, so the dominant party in a ward will usually win all the seats there. As a result, some ward residents will enjoy several councillors of their political persuasion, while remaining

residents won't have any, even if they are in the majority. To take an example, in the 2014 "all up" round of elections in the Cray Valley East Ward of the Borough of Bromley, the Conservatives took all 3 seats, even though their vote total of 3,612 represented only 35% of the 10,264 votes cast in the ward. These local distortions impact on the party political makeup of a council as a whole. For example, in the 2015 round of Manchester City Council elections, Labour took 100% of the seats with just 59% of the vote.

Distortion of representation in local government can take other extreme forms: In 2007, a British National Party candidate was elected in the Abbey Green Ward of Stoke on Trent with only 27% of the vote. The reaction of the 73% of those ward residents whose wishes were thwarted by the system can only be imagined.

*Note: For simplicity's sake, the local government figurework in this section uses totals of votes actually cast. Some information sources take account of the fact that some parties do not fight all the seats in some wards, so they "consolidate" the figures to give a more accurate council-wide picture of party strengths, thereby accentuating the distortion of First-past-the-post even more.*

## **First-past-the-post is bad for voters**

When you vote in a UK general election, you will be instructed to sign away your democratic rights with an X - the mark of illiteracy. You've only got one go; if you vote for a loser, you won't get asked about other choices. It's like going into a corner shop, asking for a Diet Cola, being told they haven't got any, and then being asked to leave the shop before you have the chance to choose another drink.

Another consequence of First-past-the-post is that voters who live in safe seats are less likely to be subject to any meaningful engagement by political parties since the result is a forgone conclusion, and so parties will be concentrating scarce resources in more marginal seats. By contrast, voters living in these marginal seats will be subjected to a torrent of populist propaganda and will be prevailed upon by the front-runners to vote tactically rather than "waste" their vote on a candidate who perhaps was their first choice. Clearly, a system which failed over two thirds of those who voted in 2019 is bad for voters.

## **First-past-the-post is bad for parties**

In their endeavours to win as many single-member seats as possible and avoid alienating any faction, parties will be inclined to put up safe, mainstream candidates, which is why the House of Commons is customarily awash with white, middle-aged, middle class males. This puts parties out of touch with the nation's poor, its young, the female population, and ethnic minorities. Some parties try to address these imbalances by imposing, for example, women-only shortlists on constituency associations selecting their parliamentary candidates, but this can alienate both local parties and local electorates, and in any case addresses only part of the problem.

Moreover, the promotion of populist policies in marginal seats can backfire if these policies are not, or cannot, be implemented. As a result, voters become disenchanted with parties and elections, and a process of disengagement between the governors and the governed gradually eats away at the fabric of our democracy and civil society. This is evidenced by falling levels of participation; for all the media frenzy, turnout in December 2019 was a mere 67.3%. The last time we had a general election turnout of 70%+ was 20 years ago

and the 83.9% turnout of 1950 is but a distant memory of a time when people believed that their vote could actually make a difference.

## **First-past-the-post is bad for the Country**

The phrase "First-past-the-post" conjures up visions of a horse race. Certainly, political parties are apt to treat an election as if it were a sporting contest, thanks to our Victorian voting system. First-past-the-post encourages adversarial campaigns in which candidates selected for little more than their gift of the gab trade insults with their counterparts in rival parties and attempt to deliver the political equivalent of knockout blows in ten second sound-bites, rather than debate policy sensibly and honestly.

Democracy is, of course, not a sporting event lasting minutes; it is a process for governing by popular consent, round the clock, year in, year out. What's more, our world is changing at bewildering speed as hundreds of millions of people in a host of developing nations demand a standard of living that we have taken for granted for decades. If we Brits are to survive, let alone prosper, in this challenging environment of shrinking resources, burgeoning populations and highly competitive markets, we need the very best government we can elect, and we must use elections as an opportunity to debate complex issues of the day, rather than treat them as if they were the political equivalent of the Grand National.

## **First-past-the-post is knackered!**

To claim that First-past-the-post is fit for purpose just because it is simple to use and is easy to understand is just plain bonkers. You might as well advocate using Stephenson's Rocket to haul trains on the HS2. No captain of industry would tolerate the continued use of such an inefficient museum piece in an industrial process, nor the waste evidenced in the aforementioned statistics on a company balance sheet. Why should we tolerate it at the ballot box?

## **Party PR; how NOT to improve our voting system**

In any debate on reform of the voting system, you will hear people talk of "proportional representation" which is any voting system that awards seats to parties in proportion to the votes cast for them so that, say, if Labour won 4 out of 10 votes, they would be awarded 4 out of 10 seats. This seems logical and democratic but there are many such systems operating worldwide, and most of them are pre-occupied with proportionality for political parties, usually at the expense of independents, voter choice and representation of local communities. These systems can best be described as "Party PR".

In Israel, for example, there is no local community representation at all; the entire state is one massive constituency of 120 seats which are shared out among a profusion of parties contesting the election in proportion to the votes cast for them nationally. Each party publishes a list of candidates in a pre-ordained pecking order, and the seats awarded to the party are doled out to the candidates on the list, starting at the top of the list and working down. At the election in March 2015, any party polling over 3.25% of the national vote was awarded proportional representation, which explains why that election resulted in an Israeli government comprising a coalition of 5 parties!

Nobody proposes using such a pure "Party PR" system here, although a version operated in the UK for elections to the European Parliament using UK regions, which is almost as bad. As in Israel, the UK regional party lists are pre-ordained or "closed"; you didn't get any say in the party's choice of candidates or where they were in the pecking order on the list. Some Party PR systems do allow voters to express a preference for a candidate on what is called an "open" list, but many voters don't use this option and in any case it is assumed that everybody will be happy for any candidate from their chosen list to be elected; words are put into voters' mouths; with Party PR, parties and politicians increase their power at the expense of the voters.

## **Additional Mess!**

There is also a hybrid device known as the Additional Member System, which delivers Party PR while retaining single member constituencies, which Westminster politicians are seeking to preserve. It was imported from Germany by the last Labour Government as part of the devolution packages for Scotland, Wales and London. There are several variations but basically about half of a parliament elected by this method is filled by MPs elected by First-past-the-post in larger single member constituencies, with the remaining seats used to "top up" the parliament so that party strengths reflect votes cast for the parties in the election. These "additional members" are usually drawn from party lists. Additional Member systems are popular with establishment politicians but represent the worst of both worlds for voters; the dysfunctional single member constituency is retained; there would be two types of MP, one type directly elected trying to cope with the increased workload of a larger single-member constituency and another comprising the "top-up" additional members, party hacks with no direct constituency responsibility, whose first loyalty would be to the party who determined their place on the party list, free to swan around the corridors of power, furthering their own political careers.

## **End of the road for political parties?**

As crude as First-past-the-post is, voters do at least retain total control; when they cast their votes, they know exactly who they are supporting and that their support will not be registered elsewhere. Moreover, First-past-the-post does not discriminate between parties or independents, nor does it require registered political parties to function.

Is this important? It might be. Perhaps political parties as we know them may be approaching extinction, having been no more than a passing phase in our political development, Victorian museum pieces from the steam age of politics when simplistic Christmas hampers of policies were required for a badly educated population which had just been given the vote. After all, philosophies fuel political parties but the battles of the "isms" were decided a long time ago and today's British politics is now a fusion of philosophies, a liberal democracy with a social welfare programme resourced by a capitalist economy.

Perhaps we are on the cusp of an exciting new era in our politics; perhaps political parties as we know them are on their way out, to be replaced over time by blended politics or "football teams" of individuals which people vote for on the basis of their competence, vision, experience and costed programme, rather than just the colour of their ridiculous dinnerplate-sized rosettes. Perhaps the election of Emmanuel Macron in France in 2017 heralds the arrival of "pop-up" parties and fusion politics.

In any event, the last thing we want to be doing at this stage is to introduce a “Party-PR” voting system which requires the continued existence of 20<sup>th</sup> century-era political parties, when a more sophisticated voting public was hoping to consign them to history.

So, how can the present voting system be reformed to better utilise wasted votes and yield a more representative result without losing its beneficial features, such as its constituency base, its neutrality and its ability to operate without political parties? Two components will transform the efficiency of our Victorian apparatus – the return of Multi Member Constituencies coupled with the introduction of Preference Voting, together known as the Single Transferable Vote or STV.

## **STV: Proportional Representation of Voters, not just Parties!**

The Single Transferable Vote is British-style PR! It was first suggested in the UK by mathematician Thomas Wright Hill and the idea was further refined by barrister and Conservative Party member Thomas Hare in a pamphlet published in 1857. It has been exported for use in the Irish Republic, Malta, Tasmania, for elections to the Australian Senate and to some Australian local councils, indirect elections to the Indian Upper House and for certain local elections in New Zealand. In the UK, the Church of England, a large number of professional bodies and trades unions use STV for their internal elections and Conservative & Labour Governments have supported its use in Northern Ireland for local council, Assembly and European elections over a 40 year period. Various commissions have proposed that STV be used for local and National Assembly elections in Wales and STV has been successfully used for Scottish Local Elections since 2007.

### **The Return of Multi-Member Constituencies**

To begin with, we need to re-introduce multi-member constituencies for Parliamentary representation. Far from being the alien concept those MPs who wish to retain the autocracy of single member constituencies would have you believe them to be, multi-member constituencies are as British as Roast Beef and Yorkshire Pudding. Multi-member representation is in widespread use in local government and was part and parcel of the very first Parliaments.

Westminster’s multi-member constituencies were not phased out completely until 1950. We need to phase them back in again because a 21st century constituency containing educated people of different sexes, ages and cultures with different attitudes, beliefs and aspirations is far better represented by several people than by one person. In her autobiography "Fighting all the way", the late Barbara Castle attributed her successful nomination as a female Labour candidate for Blackburn in 1945 to the fact that Blackburn was at that time a multi-member borough returning 2 Members of Parliament, enabling the local Labour Party selection panel to put up one male and one female to widen their party’s appeal.

In any case, there is nothing quite so ridiculous as the pious claim of an MP in sole charge of a single member constituency that he/she represents all his/her constituents whatever their political persuasion. Boris Johnson no more represents the 18,141 Labour voters in Uxbridge & South Ruislip in his pursuit of Conservative objectives than Jeremy Corbyn represents the 5,483 Conservative voters in Islington North when he opposes those

objectives. The abolition of the single member constituency is crucial to reform of the voting system.

To take the Albion City model on page 4, the three single member constituencies would be merged into one "multi-member" constituency for the whole city, returning 3 members. Since there are three seats up for grabs, the REDS and BLUES could be expected to put up 3 candidates apiece. Voters would therefore find six names on the ballot paper to choose from and this brings us to the second reform required to ensure that Albion City is democratically represented.

## **Doing away with the mark of illiteracy**

When the right to vote was progressively extended across the adult population, an "X" was all many people were able to write on their ballot paper. Today's better-educated and more politically sophisticated electorate ought to be given greater freedom of expression than is currently afforded by the mark of illiteracy.

The Single Transferable Vote, in which candidates are numbered in order of individual preference, allows voters that freedom and gives Returning Officers the additional information they need to recycle unspent voting power. The Albion voters will have complete freedom of choice to number all 6 in order of preference, or restrict their preferences to candidates of their chosen party, or individuals in different parties, or even to plump for just one candidate. The numbers entered by the voter are not points to be counted up. They simply represent instructions to the Returning Officer, as follows: "Give my vote to my first preference. If (s)he has so many votes that mine is not needed to achieve election, or so few mine will not make any difference, give my vote to my second preference" and so on, until the vote is fully used or all stated preferences are exhausted.

## **Counting single transferable votes**

The unique benefits of preferential voting are revealed at the count, although the manual counting of single transferable votes is a lengthier exercise than with First-past-the-post.

Simply put using the Albion example, the STV count is best imagined as comprising a long trestle table with 6 piles of votes on it, one pile per candidate, sorted according to voters' first preferences. Unpopular candidates are then eliminated from the contest and their small piles are sorted according to the further individual preferences of the voters, while the surplus votes of popular candidates are also recycled to ensure that all votes on the table are utilised as fully as possible. In this way, the six piles of votes of varying quantities are whittled down until 3 large piles stand testimony to the end of the count and the 3 victors.

## **STV: Proportional Representation of voters, not just parties**

Since all the votes are utilised as fully as possible and are accorded equal status, the combination of the two reforms described above ensures that the victors will reflect the community's corporate political will. In other words, if 2 out of 3 voters in a community elect to have representatives of a certain party or a certain ethnic background, their votes will cascade from one candidate's pile to another, according to declared preferences, until this corporate decision emerges as 2 out of 3 piles of votes cast for winning candidates of those voters' persuasion. STV treats all candidates as equals.

In the case of Albion, 2 MPs representing the REDS and 1 MP for the BLUES would be elected. Moreover, the voters will have decided which 2 of the 3 RED candidates and which 1 of the 3 BLUE candidates will be their representatives in the way they express their preferences. To this extent, "party proportionality" is achieved but it is one of many facets of our two reforms, a mere by-product rather than a pre-occupation. Simply to describe this reform package as "proportional representation" does not do it justice. Some commentators have, justifiably, described STV as "the Supervote".

## The Supervote: who benefits?

In the Albion model, the importance of reform was demonstrated in a two party context by stripping out any involvement of third parties and the Britannia model showed how the intervention of third parties had the potential to further distort constituency representation. So, how would political parties, both large and small, fare under STV?

Nobody knows for sure. There is undoubtedly latent support for parties which does not manifest itself under the existing arrangements, as many people vote tactically rather than for their preferred candidate. Many more, realising their vote will be wasted, do not vote at all; over 3 out of 10 of those registered to vote in the 2019 General Election did not do so. An improvement in turnout could reasonably be expected after voting reform.

But who benefits? It is erroneously supposed by many people that electoral reform is just a third party charity, not least among supporters of third parties! While this might be so with a party list system, STV works quite differently.

To begin with, third parties have benefited from the use of tactical voting under First-past-the-post. For example, Liberal Democrats in rural areas have in the past been able to supplement their vote by calling on Labour voters to vote tactically for them, in order to "keep the Tory out".

However, if STV is introduced, there will be no need to use the Liberal Democrats "as a bucket to spit in", as Labour's Austin Mitchell once described it; Labour voters will be able to express a first preference for a Labour candidate in the knowledge that a Labour MP can be elected and that, even if their favoured candidate fails to attract sufficient support to win a seat, their votes can then be counted according to further preferences. The need to vote tactically disappears with STV.

Moreover, with STV, voters can register their displeasure with an administration without deserting their favoured party; old lags guilty of incompetence can be overlooked in favour of new faces who belong to the same party, but are unsullied by stale thinking or past mistakes.

Furthermore, STV concerns itself merely with the casting of votes within a multi-member constituency at a local level; no votes are exported to bolster support for a party outside that locality. Accordingly, parties require a far greater degree of support to achieve success under STV than would be required by some party list systems which are contrived to enable support for minority parties to accumulate at a regional or national level, so as to ensure representation for the smallest faction.

To return to the Albion example, it might be supposed that one third of the vote will be required to achieve election in a three member constituency. In fact, a finer formula is used

and the figure is closer to 25%, but this still represents a formidable obstacle to smaller parties shorn of tactical support from protest voters.

So, STV benefits the supporters of all parties, rather than the parties themselves, whose candidates may be eliminated due to lack of adequate support, but whose supporters are able to have their votes recycled and counted for further preferences. It is the recycling element of STV that is overlooked by both advocates and opponents of reform who see the debate simply in terms of seats shared out in proportion to votes totted up for parties at a national or regional level. Invariably, the debate turns to Continental practice, which is concerned primarily with party proportionality. In the UK, party proportionality is not the only consideration; **British individualism demands Voter PR, rather than Party PR.**

Other benefits will accrue from the use of STV; multi-member seats offer parties the opportunity to offer a "broad church" of candidates to attract the widest level of support; the safe single member seats of First-past-the-post will be a distant memory as every vote cast will be crucial, so candidates will strain every sinew to win as many votes as possible for themselves and for party colleagues who would benefit from their vote transfers. The teamwork this engenders has the capacity to spawn co-operation between parties representing the same ward/constituency after the election, which in turn offers the prospect of a more consensual approach to governance at the centre.

But how would STV change things on the ground? We can get some idea by looking at Scottish local government which has used STV in multi-member wards since 2007. In the south-east of Edinburgh, for example, the old single member wards of Alnwickhill, Gilmerton, Kaimes and Moredun habitually returned Labour councillors to Edinburgh's City Chambers. The last First-past-the-post ballots in that area in 2003 were rock solid for Labour but the effective vote was only 24% across the 4 wards. In 2007, STV was introduced and these 4 wards were in large part merged into one 4-member ward by the name of Liberton & Gilmerton. In the 2017 round of local elections there, the effective vote was 80% under STV, returning 1 Labour, 1 Conservative and 2 Scottish Nationalist councillors, with the Liberal Democrat and Green candidates eliminated and their votes transferred according to each voter's expressed preferences.

So, who benefits from the use of STV? Clearly, while the fortunes of parties ebb and flow, it is the voter who is the main beneficiary.

In this text, we have used the 3-member "Albion" and "Britannia" models to highlight what can go wrong in the most straightforward of circumstances. The long-established Electoral Reform Society recommends the use of slightly larger multi-member constituencies returning between 4 and 6 members, to enhance proportionality.

## **Wobbly Government and other fallacies**

We have considered the deficiencies of our existing voting system, what system should be introduced to improve matters, and what systems are to be avoided. We conclude with a summary of arguments used by those who oppose reform and how they can be countered.

### **Fallacy 1: "In the 2011 referendum, voters decided not to reform our voting system"**

No they didn't. In the 2011 referendum, voters were asked: *"At present the UK uses the First-past-the-post system to elect MPs to the House of Commons. Should the Alternative*

*Vote system be used instead?"* The electorate was not asked: "*Do you wish to reform our voting system?"* or anything else. AV was a Coalition compromise, little known and, above all, not proportional. It was hardly surprising that it did not find favour and the voters' verdict represented a clear rejection of AV, rather than a ringing endorsement of First-past-the-post. In any event, the subsequent undemocratic result of the 2015 election concentrated minds and an opinion poll conducted by ORB after the election found that 61% of voters supported voting reform. Clearly, as the current fluid political situation in Scotland has demonstrated, the result of a referendum, however recent, can be rendered irrelevant by subsequent developments. Nowadays, shifts in political attitudes take place with bewildering speed and governments must keep up.

### **Fallacy 2:- "STV is far too complicated for voters to understand"**

It's a brave politician who dares to suggest that British voters are too stupid to number candidates in order of preference! In fact this argument commands far less clout than it used to, due to the number of different voting systems that the electorate has been called upon to use thanks to various constitutional changes introduced since 1997. As for STV itself, when it was first used in a public election in the British Isles for elections to the Sligo Town Council in 1919, there was a 73% turnout and only 1% of the ballot papers were completed incorrectly, quite an achievement in view of the complete lack of TV and radio and very rudimentary public information. STV was subsequently introduced for all elections in Eire. Since that time, Irish voters have appreciated the empowerment that STV affords and, over the decades, they have repulsed attempts by politicians to take it off them!

### **Fallacy 3: "The counting of an STV election takes longer and is too complicated"**

Opponents of reform criticise the complication of STV counting but Returning Officers in Northern Ireland experienced no difficulty when STV was introduced there for local and Assembly elections in the 1970s. The methodology for manual counting is concise and the accuracy of the count can be checked for all to see at the end of each stage. While a manual STV count does indeed take several hours longer, elections and eliminations take place during the counting process, stage by stage, so the political drama unfolds as the votes are being counted; there is no having to wait until the end before winners start to emerge. In any case, the extra time required for the manual counting of an STV ballot is surely a small price to pay to achieve a more democratic election, which, after all, takes place only once every 4 or 5 years. By way of a footnote, while the writer prefers manual counting, the Scottish authorities resolved to speed up the counting process when they introduced STV for their local government elections. This involves the scanning of ballot papers whose images are then "read" and counted electronically.

### **Fallacy 4: "Multi member constituencies will destroy the personal link between an MP and his/her constituents."**

As stated earlier on, single member constituencies are a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of our Parliament and the personal link which MPs like to think exists with an electorate in a single member constituency is in most cases non-existent; in a Hansard Society Survey of 2013, only 22% of voters could name their MP. Of course, your average party hack will prefer a constituency all to himself, without having to work with other MPs representing the same patch, some of whom may, horror of horrors, belong to other parties! If we wanted a voting system designed to suit party politicians, then of course we would insist on retaining single member constituencies. But we do not. We want a voting system that benefits voters and, as previously observed, it surely stands to reason that a

21st century constituency containing educated people of different sexes, ages and cultures with different attitudes, beliefs and aspirations will be far better represented by several people than by one person. In any case, Parliament has since 1997 approved the adoption of numerous voting systems which required the use of multi-member constituencies. If Westminster Parliamentarians were quite prepared to saddle their colleagues in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, local government and those fighting European Parliamentary elections with multi-member seats, why are they so unwilling to adopt them for the House of Commons?

#### **Fallacy 5: "STV will aid the election of extremists."**

Some commentators believe that, because STV is classified as a system of proportional representation, it will deliver seats to minority parties with tiny percentages of the vote. As previously stated, while some party list systems of proportional representation are contrived to accommodate the smallest faction by taking into account votes cast at a regional or even national level, the mechanics of STV are designed simply to deliver proportionality of views within a local community, to be represented by just several individuals. This creates a very high 'de facto' threshold. In the Albion example, a candidate would have needed 25% of the vote to achieve election under STV. This constitutes a formidable challenge for third parties like the Liberal Democrats, never mind fringe candidates, but if they do achieve it, any democracy should ensure that such candidates - however extreme or odious- should be elected. In any case, the attributes of STV mentioned earlier will afford most voters sufficient freedom of expression to register their displeasure with incumbents without having to "go to extremes".

#### **Fallacy 6 " Equalising single member constituencies will set things right."**

Supporters of First-past-the-post claim that current government plans to "equalise" single member constituencies by re-drawing the boundaries to ensure that each MP represents the same number of voters will make the existing voting system fairer. While such an exercise will indeed address certain anomalies, it is mere sticking plaster; it fails to address the crucial flaws inherent in First-past-the-post. As the Albion and Britannia models demonstrated earlier, a party with the least votes can still win a First-past-the-post election, even with exactly the same number of voters in each constituency.

#### **Fallacy 7 "STV will mean endless coalitions and wobbly government"**

Champions of First-past-the-post have in the past held firmly to the view that systems of proportional representation habitually deliver legislatures requiring coalitions of parties to form governments, which are perceived to be weak, and are contrasted with the Westminster experience whereby our existing First-past-the-post voting system delivers single-party governments, which are claimed to be strong and stable.

Clearly what happened in June 2017 has blown this argument out of the water. First-past-the-post has now given us two hung parliaments within the space of 8 years. In fact, there is nothing in the First-past-the-post rulebook which guarantees a single party administration with a working majority; coalitions elected under First-past-the-post have worked in times of war, were the norm in Westminster before WW2 and now operate as a matter of routine in local government. Council officers are reported as actually preferring hung councils to single party administrations; it seems that the quality of decision-making tends to improve because proposals do not go through on the nod and are subject to scrutiny by more people with different ideas.

This pre-occupation with single party government seems to be a concern limited to those who have simply become accustomed to the post-war political scene in Westminster and their contention that coalition government is weak and wobbly has been rather undermined by the 2010 Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition. For all the well-publicised bad-tempered arguments, this 2-party government survived a full 5 year Parliament, with MPs of both parties putting aside their differences and working together to oversee recovery from the recession. It has to be said that this would be unremarkable in most other walks of life, where ordinary folk are in the habit of working as a team with other colleagues - even those they don't like - but in post-war Westminster politics, the 2010-2015 Coalition was a singular achievement.

In any case, as demographic changes eat into the traditional strongholds of the main political parties, perhaps First-past-the-post is about to deliver a series of hung Westminster Parliaments requiring multi-party governments, just as it did before WW2. Perhaps Westminster politicians need to plan for this by adopting a more consensual approach to the governance of our country.

Indeed, it could be argued that the electorate has consistently voted for coalitions since the war because no party has won over 50% of the vote since 1935, not even in so-called "landslide" elections. If this pattern of voting were to continue, the introduction of STV might be expected to result in multi-party coalitions. The consequences are a matter for conjecture. Coalitions can work to the Nation's benefit. But even if they resulted in enfeebled administrations, as opponents of reform claim would happen, a majority of the electorate would surely then resolve to abandon the concept of coalition government and instead give absolute power to one party in the following election.

The point is, unlike First-past-the-post, whose outcome is about as certain as that from a throw of dice, STV would guarantee that the will of the electorate would be accurately reflected, whether this was manifested as single party, multi-party or no-party government.

## **"A big improvement and absolutely fair"**

There will never be arithmetical perfection when over 47 million voters elect 650 Members of Parliament from among thousands of candidates belonging to a host of political parties to represent local constituencies. At the end of the day, all that can be asked of a voting system is that it should be neutral, that all votes should have an equal value, that voters retain absolute control over their votes, that the result broadly reflects the wishes of the electorate, whether this is expressed in a party political context or not, and that as many of the electorate as possible are able to identify with a successful candidate whom they helped to elect and whom they consider to be their elected representative.

The Single Transferable Vote in Multi Member Constituencies is the only system which meets all the above requirements, and the reasons why it has earned the "Supervote" sobriquet are to be found in a press comment in the Sligo Champion, reporting on the first use of STV in Ireland in January 1919: *"The system has justified its adoption. We saw it work; we saw its simplicity; we saw its unerring honesty to the voter all through; we saw the result in the final count; and we join in the general expression of those who followed it with an intelligent interest - it is as easy as the old way; it is a big improvement and it is absolutely fair."*

## Don't just sit there...

If we have such a dysfunctional electoral system, you'd be justified in asking why something has not been done about it before now. Depressingly, it's all about self-interest. Westminster politicians of both parties of government still tarry at the First-past-the-post gaming table simply because every throw of the dice offers the chance of an outright win. They want absolute power. They do not wish to share it. They would rather lose, so long as there was a chance that they could win on the next throw of the dice. Both main parties have long abandoned any ambition to represent the majority of the electorate and so both cling to the electoral system that they believe will deliver absolute majorities of seats on a minority of the votes from "their" people. This does not stand close examination, of course, but both main parties have so far been able to swerve any meaningful debate on the subject simply because the issue has rarely appeared on the national radar. It's all about raising awareness of the issue and you can play your part!

To begin with, write to your MP, whose details you will find on the [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk) website. Just say that you have read about the need for electoral reform on this website – [www.knackered.org.uk](http://www.knackered.org.uk) – and ask for their comments on it. Then join something! There is now a host of campaigning organisations. Have a look at some of these web sites:

The Electoral Reform Society

[www.electoral-reform.org.uk](http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk)

STV Action

<https://stvact.wordpress.com>

Make Votes Matter

[www.makevotesmatter.org.uk](http://www.makevotesmatter.org.uk)

Conservative Action for Electoral Reform

[www.conservativeelectoralreform.org.uk](http://www.conservativeelectoralreform.org.uk)

Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform

[www.labourcampaignforelectoralreform.org.uk](http://www.labourcampaignforelectoralreform.org.uk)

Liberal Democrats for Electoral Reform

[www.lider.org](http://www.lider.org)

Whatever you do, don't just sit there!

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