

Note: Also see the subsequent letter from John Death (1999.003.NFB) and FB's response to it (1999.030)

Yes it's true: PR equals fudge

Francis Bennion examines the election results for the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly

At the end of April¹ I analysed the recommendations for the Westminster Parliament of the Report of the Independent Commission on the Voting System (the Jenkins Commission) in the light of the forthcoming elections on May 6 for the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. I suggested that the Jenkins recommendations, which heavily favour the introduction of proportional representation (PR), are defective in several ways. In particular they leave unexamined the fact that the coalition governments inevitably produced by PR are undemocratic. The manifesto on which a party fights the election, and the voters base their decisions, cannot be put into effect even if that party wins most seats. To satisfy some other party, the manifesto must be altered *after* the election and without consultation with the voters. I suggested that the results on May 6 would confirm these misgivings, and such has proved to be the case.

The new Scottish Parliament

As a result of the May 6 elections the new Scottish Parliament has 129 members. Of these, 73 represent individual constituencies and were elected on the traditional first past the post system (FPTP). The other 56 are additional members elected from top-up party lists by PR. As was widely predicted, the May 6 results did not produce an overall majority (65 seats) for any party and therefore made a coalition virtually inevitable. If all seats had been contested on FPTP Labour would have had an overall majority. The actual results were: Labour 56 seats, Scottish Nationalists 35, Conservatives 18, Liberal Democrats 17, and Independents 3.²

The consequent need for manifesto-trimming at once caused uneasiness among commentators. Bernard Connolly complained that "coalition government means that policies in manifestos are no longer contingent commitments to the electorate but instead merely weapons to be used in horse-trading with other politicians".³ Even some Labour MSPs (as we must learn to call them) shared the uneasiness. John McAllion (Labour), elected for Dundee East under FPTP, expressed a wish that Labour would not join a coalition. He said that the party should soldier on alone so as to avoid depriving voters of the manifesto commitments they had been promised.⁴ There is still some integrity left in our politics.

The former Liberal Democrat leader Lord Steel of Aikwood, elected as an additional member of the Scottish Parliament and later its Speaker, sought to sugar the pill by avoiding the term "coalition" and opting instead for what he called a "partnership", that all-purpose modern

¹ Page 636 above.

² *The Times*, May 8 1999.

³ Letter in *The Times*, May 11 1999.

⁴ BBC Radio Four, *Today*, May 10 1999.

weasel word.⁵ Steel seemed to think the electorate might be induced to think a joinder of parties less opprobrious if one called it a partnership rather than (as it truly is) a coalition. Not much integrity there, though in fact that is how things finally emerged.

It was clear from the start that the biggest bone of contention in this battle of the manifestos was the Labour commitment to charge university students tuition fees. Labour's desired Scottish partners the Liberal Democrats would have none of this and had campaigned strongly against it in the run-up to the election.. Here was a classic example of what is wrong with PR. Those who voted Labour in the election are taken to have desired the imposition of tuition fees, for that was in the Labour manifesto. On the other hand those who voted Liberal Democrat are taken to have voted for the abolition of such fees, for *that* was in the Liberal Democrat manifesto. The final deal included a promise to set up a review of the tuition fees question. Other sops given to the Liberal Democrats were a withdrawal from the Private Finance Initiative and the introduction of PR for Scottish local government elections, both contrary to Labour ideas.

Incidentally it should be pointed out that Scottish Labour apparently never contemplated that their coalition should be with the party attracting the second largest number of votes (Scottish Nationalists) or with that attracting the third largest number of votes (Conservatives). If PR is really supposed to produce a government with maximum voter support it is arguable that the coalition in Scotland should be between Labour and Scottish Nationalists, totalling 91 seats out of 129. The answer Scottish Labour would no doubt give is that it is more natural to combine with the party nearest to them in outlook. This sort of confusion is what you get from PR.

The Welsh Assembly

The new Welsh Assembly has 60 members. Of these, 40 represent individual constituencies and are elected on FPTP. The other 20 are additional members elected from top-up party lists by PR. To the surprise of some, the May 6 results also did not produce an overall majority (31 seats) for any party and therefore made a coalition virtually inevitable in Wales too. The actual results were: Labour 28 seats, Plaid Cymru (Nationalists) 17, Conservatives 9, and Liberal Democrats 6.⁶ At the time of writing the final arrangement in Wales has not yet been worked out.

The biggest bone of contention in the Welsh battle of the manifestos (in this case literally) was the Labour commitment to retain the ban on beef on the bone imposed because of the risk of BSE and its human form CJD. The other Welsh parties are opposed to this ban, and horse-trading (or perhaps one should say beef-trading) went on in the valleys.

The media complained when the Scottish deal was announced on 14 May that it had all been stitched up behind closed doors. How had the Liberal Democrat leader Jim Wallace managed to land for himself the unexpected post of Deputy to the First Minister, Donald Dewar? What had been yielded up in return for that? No one was telling. At the time of writing it seems that the final deal in Wales may be more transparent.

I leave the last word (for the moment) with the veteran Labour MP Gerald Kaufman. Responding to suggestions that manifesto-bargaining is commonplace in Europe, he wrote: "the prevalence of such 'negotiations' explains the lack of governmental stability in so many European countries, where governments rise and fall not because of the wishes of the electorate but because of the tantrums and manoeuvres of small unrepresentative factions . . . The one encouraging outcome of this comic opera situation is that the prospect of such an

⁵ *Breakfast with Frost*, BBC 1, May 9 1999.

⁶ *The Times*, May 8 1999.

electoral system for the Westminster Parliament is now even more remote".⁷ For the health of our electoral system, let's hope he is right.

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149 NLJ (May 1999) 786.

⁷ Letter in *The Times*, May 12 1999.