

COMMENT ON THE NEWS 3 – 23 MAY 2005

In *Comment on the News 2*, put up on the morning after the general election, I discussed the problem arising from the fact that Labour gained a third term with only 36 per cent of the votes cast and slightly under a quarter of the aggregate votes which could have been cast, whether they were or not. What to do? I promised to brood on this conundrum, and perhaps come up with an answer in a later Comment. (Or perhaps not.)

The tired answer of the Independent newspaper has been to run a so-called Campaign for Democracy (in fact a Campaign for Proportional Representation or PR). The paper is asking its readers to sign a petition to the Prime Minister reading-

I believe that the result of this month's election, in which your government was elected with a 67-seat majority on 36% of the popular vote and with the support of 22% of the electorate, is a subversion of our democracy. I call on you, in your final term as Prime Minister, to institute urgent reform of our voting system so that the British people are encouraged to believe that their votes count and that the result of a general election is more representative of their wishes.

This involves one obvious fallacy, that your vote does not 'count' unless it is on the winning side. This shows a basic failure to understand choice by voting. If people vote for or against a proposition all the votes cast 'count' but the majority prevail against the minority. Simple really. To expect every vote cast to 'count' in the sense of being on the winning side is obviously absurd (except to those who are blind to the obvious).

PR is old hat, and demonstrably a failure. To show how old hat it is I will run through, in date order, various items on it among my writings on this website. These start in [1983](#) a letter in the Times ticking off a clergyman who encouraged direct action by PR enthusiasts. A [1989](#) letter in the Daily Telegraph exposed the way Ireland has experienced the drawbacks of PR. Another letter in the Times in [1998](#) contains a refutation of PR by reference to an imaginary election in Ruritania. In 1999 Mr Blair set up a five-person Commission headed by the late Roy Jenkins to look into PR. I reported on that in a [1999](#) article. In another [1999](#) article I followed this up by showing how PR had failed in the first elections to the new Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly. Finally in a [2005](#) Times letter I commented on the position after the recent general election-

The Liberal Democrat leader Mr Charles Kennedy has hailed the arrival of a three-party system. If you have three parties you get three different manifestos. There is unlikely to be a majority for any one of these.

Now we are threatened with a repeat of the Jenkins Commission, unless the ghost of Jenkins succeeds in frightening Mr Blair off. Already he has put up the schizophrenic Lord Falconer of Thoroton (who can't decide whether he is Lord Chancellor or a Secretary of State, so calls himself both) to shoot down PR all over again and dismiss the possibility of a referendum on the subject. The Independent reacted predictably. On 21 May 2005 their Marie Woolf said-

Lord Falconer of Thoroton, the Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs, angered

politicians when he declared yesterday that the public did not want to change the voting system - even though he acknowledged that a poll conducted by The Independent showed that 62 per cent of people wanted a switch to proportional representation. His comments followed Downing Street's assertion that there was no appetite for reform. 'I don't think there is a real groundswell for change,' he said on Radio 4's Today programme. 'We don't, as a government, support the idea of a referendum.'

The Green Party chimed in with 'first-past-the-post is archaic and anti-democratic'. Just shows how much they know.