

Polly Toynbee and PR

On 20 January 2006 I emailed the following to Polly Toynbee about her *Guardian* column-

You say today that the Social Democratic Party (which I joined at the outset) 'was crushed by the first-past-the post system, *without a fair share of seats*'. Please note that the italicised words are untrue, as I could show at length if you wish. Furthermore PR inevitably produces coalitions, where no elector gets the manifesto she or he voted for. Is that fair?

She replied saying we didn't get 25% of the seats, but we got the votes, adding that as for 'fair' she thinks publicly-negotiated policies between parties are fairer than private fixes in back rooms between de facto coalitions Lab and Con, 'with us left to hold our nose and vote for least worst'. She added: 'At least if you vote for a small party you know your party has a chance of exerting that amount of influence.' She said she knew there were problems 'but this system is the worst'. I replied-

The Commons is a collection of people each representing one area of the country. Fairness does not require a losing vote in one area to have any worth in another area. That contradicts the nature of voting for a representative.

Her answer was that at least I should support the alternative vote, putting candidates in 1, 2, 3 order in each constituency.

I left it at that, though I could have returned my stock answer on the alternative vote. This is contained (among other arguments on PR) in an unpublished letter I sent to the *Daily Express* on 18 April 1998. I will end this by giving the full text of the letter.

Bob Coultas (Letters, 18 April 1998) is mistaken in praising proportional representation (PR), just as Paddy Ashdown is mistaken in saying it gives fair votes. First past the post (FPTP) is the fairest system because it awards the seat to the candidate who got more votes than anyone else.

Mr Coultas is quite wrong to say that FPTP 'does not make for good or stable government'. History shows it makes for both. It is the patched-up coalitions inevitably produced by PR that lead to instability, shown by constant changes of government.

The greatest flaw of PR is that it never gives the voter for a particular party the policies the party advocated in the election. This is because the party never gets enough seats to form a government on its own. To achieve a majority of votes in parliament it must always join with one or more other parties with different policies. The result is a mishmash.

All the varieties of PR are open to grave objections. The alternative vote system gives as big a value to an elector's second preference as it does to the first, which is contrary to the reality. The additional list system, adding non-constituency seats to create an aggregate number of members corresponding to votes cast, means that some members were not in fact elected and have no constituents. The multi-member constituency system, extending over a huge area, is unwieldy, giving an elector no MP to call his or her own.

PR means that you always get a coalition government. Deals are done to arrive at this. Principles are sacrificed. The voter never can be sure what he or she is really voting for. One-party government means clear, strong government (so far as that's possible in a democracy). It means government precisely according to the election manifesto that was more popular than any other manifesto. That is much better than fudge government, under deals botched together *after* the election. So let's keep the present system for Westminster.