

Also see FB's original article in the *New Law Journal* (1999.010) and his response (1999.030) to this letter written by John Death

Undemocratic PR?

One tendentious and ill-informed article on PR by Francis Bennion can be merely ignored. However, since you let him continue to write in this vein, a response is necessary.

In the second article (*NLJ* May21, 786) he repeats his claim that PR is undemocratic, since governments do not govern on the basis of a single party's manifesto, but on a compromise which inevitably leaves some parts of the manifesto dormant. This statement is absurd from first to last. Clearly, a system which means that parties achieve fairer representation based upon the proportion of the vote they receive than the first past the -post system is more democratic, not less. It is true that parties have to share power if they do not win the support of more than half the electorate, but since he seems to prefer an alternative which means that, though no government since the war has won over 50 per cent of the vote, it can usually garner over 80 per cent of the seats, he has a poor understanding of democracy. In 1997, Labour won 65 per cent of the seats on 44% of the vote

Since the people will vote for parties in such a way that none commands overall support, a sensible compromise which gives a minority of voters some of what they want is clearly fairer than one that gives a lot of these voters no say at all in what is done, while giving one minority party what Lord Hailsham called 'an elective dictatorship. Even a casual observer of the Scottish Parliament campaign should notice that the parties that formed the coalition were fairly honest during and before the campaign that coalition was a likely result. I also heard media interviews with people who said they would cast their constituency and additional member votes for two different parties in order to make coalition government more likely. In fact, one reasonable interpretation of the result is to say that the people gave a mandate for a Lib-Lab coalition.

This is a more plausible interpretation than Mr Bennion's assumption that people give a mandate to a party to carry out every last dot and comma of its election manifesto. Not one in a hundred Scottish voters will have the slightest idea what, say, Labour's policy was on the development of the rural economy in the \Vest Highlands. Those who have looked at the manifestos will have seen strong similarities between the Labour and Liberal Democrat policies on the broad range of policy areas, which make the coalition both more honest and more democratic than what he proposes. That Labour made concessions on some issues and the Lib Dems on others which were contrary to their manifesto pledges just reflects the reality that Scottish voters did not want either policy in undiluted form. Really, I would have thought that a former Parliamentary Counsel would recognise the importance of negotiation and compromise on how policies are enacted.

Quoting Gerald Kaufman does not make Mr Bennion's argument any stronger. Mr Kaufman is not one of the foremost students of electoral systems, but a Labour MP used to exercising power with no real popular mandate. It is nonsense to say that coalition and its attendant negotiations make European governments unstable. I wish that we had the economic problems and instability of Germany, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands. Where there is instability, it has to be recognised that the electoral systems are designed to *reflect* the underlying social tensions, as in Belgium, rather than cause them. Can Mr Bennion imagine what social chaos would arise between Flemings and Walloons if they adopted our traditional system which gives an arbitrary governing majority to one group?

PR is neither as malign as he imagines nor as benign as some of its adherents claim. There is certainly a lot that can be said against the specific and varied electoral systems this Government has

chosen for different purposes. However, the one thing that cannot be denied is that these changes have made our wretched system a little more democratic.

John Death

*Head of Law and Politics,
Palmer's College, Essex*