

behind 'Next Steps', just as his predecessor did. It has been assigned an important place in the 'Citizen's Charter'. In that sense, the programme has already survived an important transfer of power.

However, by far the biggest tests have yet to come. Will the massive Social Security Benefits Agency be as amenable to the new style of civil service management as the smaller agencies? Will the main opposition parties continue to look benignly upon the government's attempt to create a new model civil service, now that the issue of ratified privatisation (via expanded competitive tendering) has been raised? (see Figure 4).

Whatever the answers to these questions, it is clear that the result of the 1992 General Election has ensured that 'Next Steps' will not face the acid test for any programme of reform: a change of administration. With the next general election likely to take place when the first wave of agencies are nine years old, the prospect of reversing 'Next Steps' seems remote. On balance it seems probable that the Thatcher-Major (or Ibbs?) new model civil service will be firmly entrenched by the turn of the century.

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# ARGUMENTS AGAINST PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

Proportional representation (PR) has been promoted so effectively over the last few years that it has become a market leader without the inconvenience of a proper public debate. The Liberal Democrats are firmly wedded to PR and the Labour party is continuing to review its policy on the issue. It is an open secret that the National Front and British National party believe PR would lead to their representation in Parliament, which is what neo-Fascist parties elsewhere in Europe have already achieved under PR.

Why is PR so popular? One reason may be that its proponents routinely call it electoral 'reform', which tends to pre-empt any debate about its desirability. Mr Paddy Ashdown has even started calling it 'fair votes' — a cruder but even more effective propaganda trick. But most ordinary voters don't even know what PR means.

#### WHAT IS PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION?

PR is supposed to be a fairer system for electing MPs than the present system (Bogdanor, 1984). In the 1983 General Election, to cite a notorious example, the Liberal/SDP Alliance received 25.4% of the votes, only slightly fewer than the Labour party which received 27.6%, but won only 23 seats compared to Labour's 209 MPs, which was manifestly disproportional.

PR is intended to ensure that the proportions of seats won by the various parties reflect the proportions of votes cast. The system of PR most widely advocated in Britain is the single transferable vote (STV), which is used in Ireland and several Commonwealth countries.

**Single transferable vote** STV requires multi-member constituencies. Ballot papers list the candidates' names and invite voters to write the numbers 1, 2, 3, and so on, opposite the names in order of preference. Counting votes under STV is rather complicated (Bogdanor, 1984, pp.75-110). The first step is to work out how many votes are needed to be certain of winning a seat. In a three-member constituency, a candidate who received one-quarter of the first-preference votes would probably win one of the seats, because however the remaining votes were split they could not give three other candidates more votes than that, but three other candidates could in theory receive exactly one-quarter of the votes each, which would produce a four-way tie. To be certain of election, a candidate in a three-member constituency needs one-quarter of the votes plus one.

In general, if  $v$  votes are cast in an  $n$ -member constituency, the electoral quota is  $v$  divided by  $(n + 1) + 1$ . For example, if 100 votes are cast in a three-seat constituency the electoral quota is 100 divided by  $(3 + 1) + 1$ , that is 26.

The first count determines whether any of the candidates has reached the electoral quota and is therefore elected. Next, the candidate with the fewest first-preference votes is eliminated and that candidate's votes, instead of being wasted, are transferred to the other candidates according to voters' second preferences. The 'excess' votes (above the electoral quota) of any candidate who has been elected are similarly transferred to the other candidates. The second count then takes place, and any candidate who reaches the electoral quota is elected. The process continues until the right number of candidates are elected.

**The alternative vote** AV is not a proportional system for the country but applies a variant of STV in single-member constituencies. Candidates in each constituency are ranked in order of preference by the voters and the electoral quota is always 50% of the votes cast plus one. If no candidate on the first count reaches the quota the candidate with the lowest number of votes is eliminated and his or her votes are distributed according to their second preferences. This system ensures that all MPs are elected with an absolute majority of the votes cast in their constituency, but the national result is not proportional.

### WHAT IS WRONG WITH PR?

Unlike the German system of PR, neither STV nor AV offers any guarantee of proportional representation in Parliament as a whole — a rather significant shortcoming that is rarely mentioned. They are designed to ensure something quite different: that all votes count and none is wasted. They are, therefore, not really methods of ensuring national proportional representation, although STV (unlike AV) does often achieve rough proportionality. Both systems can produce alarmingly unfair results at the constituency level (Doron & Kronik, 1977; Fishburn & Brams, 1983).

What would be the effect of STV in a British general election? In the 1992 General Election, in Britain (excluding Northern Ireland) the Conservatives attracted 42.8% of the votes, Labour 35.2%, and the Liberal/Liberal Democrats 18.3%. Had the number of seats in Westminster reflected the parties' proportions of the national vote, then the Conservatives would have won 271 seats, Labour 223, and the Liberal Democrats 116. (The other 41 seats would have been won by the nationalists, the Northern Ireland parties and 'Others'.) In these circumstances no party

### CRITICISMS OF THE IRISH STV ELECTORAL SYSTEM

There is a continuing debate in Ireland about alleged defects of the STV system as it currently operates. The main criticisms are:

(i) Multi-member constituencies lead to constant competition between members, even between members of the same party. Nursing the constituency is a major preoccupation to the detriment of the member's role in the Dail.

(ii) Election results usually give such a tight balance in the Dail Eireann that it is difficult to form a government with a working majority.

Source: O'Connor, T. (1991) 'Proportional Representation in Ireland', *Representation*, Vol. 30, No. 111, December, p.40.

| Party       | % of total votes <sup>a</sup> | Seats | % of total seats |
|-------------|-------------------------------|-------|------------------|
| Fianna Fail | 44.2                          | 77    | 46.4             |
| Fine Gael   | 29.3                          | 55    | 33.1             |
| Labour      | 9.5                           | 15    | 9.0              |
| Others      | 17.0                          | 19    | 11.5             |

Note: (a) the percentage is the share of the first-preference votes.

Source: O'Connor, T. (1991) 'Proportional Representation in Ireland', *Representation*, Vol. 30, No. 111, December, p.39.

**Table 1** The outcome of the 1989 Irish General Election

would have had an overall majority, for which 326 seats are needed. The consequence would have been a political impasse until either the Conservatives or Labour managed to form a government by doing a deal with the Liberal Democrats.

The same thing would have happened in other recent elections. The 'winning' party would have been unable to enact any legislation without the blessing of the much smaller centre party. In most recent elections, STV would have led to the centre party, with a relatively small popular vote, wielding enough power to hold Conservative or Labour governments to ransom.

### POLITICAL PROTECTION RACKETS

This is exactly what happens in Israel, where under a form of PR extremist parties with only a handful of MPs in the Knesset regularly threaten to bring down the government unless their generally unpopular policies are implemented. In Ireland in the 1989 General Election, held under STV, Fianna Fail won the most seats but not an overall majority. Fianna Fail was forced to negotiate a coalition with the Progressive Democrats, who held only six seats in the Dail but demanded, and secured in return for their support, two full Cabinet posts, which was out of all proportion with their electoral popularity.

Government coalitions held together by political protection rackets are notoriously weak and unstable. They tend to produce either paralysis or upheaval. There were no fewer than five general elections in Ireland during the 1980s. In Italy, which uses another system of PR, coalition governments seldom last long enough to implement any of their manifesto promises, as the recent crisis in May 1992 showed. In Britain itself, government coalitions outside war have generally been short-lived and unsuccessful.

The introduction of PR in Britain is seldom debated in these terms. It might result in weak and unstable government based on opportunistic pacts and cynical horse-trading.

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