

## **Don't waste your best asset**

by Bernard Owen and Guy Lardeyret\*

The issue at stake in Great Britain does not concern only the British. If the solution to the problem should give them rapidly a legitimate Prime minister, it should not be at the cost of a major political mistake, which would undermine the quality of their regime.

Their electoral system is not only the most efficient, because it guarantees political stability and an alternative if people are dissatisfied, but it is the only way ever discovered anywhere which allows the emergence of a political majority in the public space - that is to say compatible with the first principle of democracy : the power given to the citizens of fixing the political direction. Elected delegates come afterwards to implement their decision.

If the United Kingdom has been able to do without a written constitution until today, it is partly because the electoral system is the most crucial element in a constitution. This country has been lucky enough to have made the right choice from the beginning. This voting rule has been applied in reality for more than one thousand years in the northern islands of Europe – deciding by cheers who should lead the group.

Before moving in time to the 2010 election, a few words about the troublesome Liberal Party since it used to be one of the two major parties. On the one hand it was the progressive party that had the trade unions well in hand and could count on the non-conformist community. On the other hand, there was the Conservative Party. Before the 1918 election socialist parties or labour candidates had only been elected in non opposition contests with the Liberals who considered themselves quite rightly as a very powerful party. Dramatic events put an end to this bipartisan political system. Two of their leaders clashed during the war: Lloyd George, who had been prime minister at the end of the first world war and Asquith, who had previously been prime minister but was still head of the Liberal party.

Lloyd George held what is called the coupon election in 1918 thus breaking up the Liberal Party and favouring as a result the Labour Party. This brought about the breaking up of the voting habits of the British. No longer did the voter have to choose between two main left-right tendencies but in some constituencies had to choose between 4 parties unfamiliar to British political habits. There were Lloyd George liberals (with the “coupon”) against the “true liberals” led by Asquith, then the Labour candidate who was a newcomer at national level and had to rush to find candidates and lastly the conservative candidate without a coupon because Lloyd George had given coupons to the liberals and conservatives who opposed themselves at constituency level. This new political perspective did away with all that had been in place for years. It can be considered as a revolution through democratic means.

How could a politician, who had been able to guide Great Britain to victory, could have been so short-sighted ? Probably Lloyd's ambition as Asquith was still at the head of the liberals. Lloyd George wanted to lead a new party. He was certainly ambitious and vain as the letters to his wife show. The Liberal Party still had money but not Lloyd George who when once again prime minister in 1918 sold a huge amount of honors for an amount of over £1,500,000. Four years later Liberals unified and Lloyd George put less than £100,000 on the table.

As soon as Asquith realized that the Liberals had become a minor party he proposed the idea of PR.

The importance of democracy lies in what is now called “good governance”. This means continuity and the possibility of a moderate alternative in government if the country needs a change. In PR countries care-taker governments (or “technician governments”) can last for months. This means that parties cannot agree on a coalition government. And if one adds the length of time of care-taker governments from 1945 to the present you obtain 4 years in Belgium, the Netherlands, Finland. For four years these countries have had governments without a majority. Because PR divides communities, divides parties, which is the opposite of the first past the post system. Belgium and Spain are current examples of countries that are breaking up; you can guess why Spain did not accept the breakaway of Kosovo..

In the analysis of different type of elections an important factor is usually not considered. For example, what is at stake in one-member constituencies is quite different to what the voter will see at stake in large-size multi member constituencies of a proportional system. We always have to bear in mind that electoral systems are not passive. The mathematical part is easy enough to work out and the results predicted but the active part, that is the stakes perceived by the voters, parties and candidates, is much more difficult to determine. As a result it is impossible to transfer the figures obtained by a first past the post election to that of a proportional system.

What about the 2010 hung parliament?

All political events have roots and those have to be brought to light if we want to clearly understand the present events.

Didn't Shakespeare consider life as a stage ? The events leading to the “hung parliament” can be considered as a three act play

**First act:** The United Kingdom introduced proportional representation for the European elections. Great Britain was divided into 12 constituencies. The d'Hondt method was used for all regions except for Northern Ireland where STV was applied. The results for the 2004 and 2009 elections show that the two-party system is in shambles. The Conservatives maintain the lead in both cases with 25 seats in 2009. In 2009 Labour is beaten in votes by UKIP: 15.7% against 16.5% but with an equal number of seats, 13. The Liberals lose one seat and obtain 11 with 13.7% votes but the greens have 8.6% of the votes which represents a gain of 2.4% as compared to 2004 and have 2 seats.

**Second act:** Regional parliamentary elections for Scotland and Wales (devolution). The electoral system chosen is mixed. There are more one-member plurality constituencies than proportional ones. Unfortunately, they compensate so that a party who gains many plurality seats obtains less proportional seats whatever the proportional result. This of course favours smaller parties and does away with the advantage in seats of larger parties in majority-type systems which tend to create semi bipartisan party systems.

Let's get down to the facts. In Scotland 73 members are elected in one-member constituencies by plurality, in Wales 40. The electoral system is mixed so that the voter has 2 votes. The second is for the proportional seats. 56 seats in Scotland within 8 constituencies and 20 seats in 5 Welsh constituencies. Let us see what happens since two elections have been held since 2003 and 2007.

In Scotland, in the 2003 elections, one-member constituencies, plurality elections, gave the Labour Party 46 seats out of the 73 which meant that it would have an absolute majority. After compensation the results were:

Labour Party	39.1% of the seats
Scottish nationalists	20.9% of the seats
Conservatives	13.8% of the seats
Liberals	13.2% of the seats
Others	13.0% of the seats

These results mean that no party obtains a majority.

The compensation for these elections means that because of Labour's 63% of the plurality seats it will obtain only 7% of the seats in the proportionnal part while the Scottish Nationalist Party that got 13% plurality seats obtains 32%.

The 2007 elections are disturbing because of the breaking up of the votes in favour of the Scottish Nationalists who gain 12 extra seats in the plurality elections and obtains 8 more in the proportionnalist part.

The final result after compensation is:

Scottish nationalists	36.4% of the seats
Labour party	35.7% of the seats
Conservatives	13.2% of the seats
Liberals	12.4% of the seats

The Welsh results are different in that the size of the proportional constituency is smaller and that compensation is applied at the proportional constituency level.

It is interesting to note that the Welsh Plaid Cymru has 3 more seats than in 2003. On the other hand, it obtains 8 seats by way of the proportional compensation.

The final result is

Labour Party	43.3% of the seats
Plaid Cymru	25% of the seats
Conservative Party	20% of the seats
Liberals	10% of the seats
Others	1.7% of the seats

Even though regional parties regional nothing stops them from campaigning in UK parliamentary elections and gaining seats .

**Third Act:** Three televised debates. Great Britain seems to be moving toward a more presidential system. The result can be easily guessed. In a country that has two main parties,

one in government, another in opposition, a debate among them could only help a third party leader. Whatever his performance he was there on a perceived equal footing with the two main candidates. Some of the side effects of these debates are clear : in the United States the presence of Ross Perrot who had money but no local or regional political backing took enough votes from the elder Bush so that Clinton was elected.

Contrary to appearances, proportional representation (PR) would not be progress in England. It is a system based on a misunderstanding on the role of an election. A vote doesn't aim at giving a photography of political divisions of a society - polls do that every day. Ballot-boxes are given to the citizens as a means to decide who should govern, at whatever political level. It should not only designate a winner, it should also give him the capacity to govern. This is why the *first past the post* system is consubstantial to democracy. We now come back to the key words of "good governance". In practice, PR transfers the choice of the political orientation from the citizens to mandatory agents, in a way that would be legitimate in a corporatist society – because the political divisions are reproduced in the deliberative assemblies. In a democracy, the main effect of PR is to create fragile coalition governments. The political forces are divided when the election should, on the contrary, encourage people to gather behind a team able to *govern*.

If the winners of the last election are not able to put together a coalition government or try a minority government, another election should be held. We have heard of a change in the electoral system. That would not only be dangerous but quite undemocratic as it would be held under dramatic political circumstances and are the people aware of the risks?. There is another point worthy of consideration: now that Scotland and Wales have their own parliament is there any reason for their national electoral constituencies to have a smaller number of registered voters?

The present concern is that England has to be given rapidly a new, strong and stable government. In spite of a "hung Parliament", the British should be attentive to preserve their main institutional asset, that is, their electoral system. The Westminster model has to remain the world's best political regime. It has to be remembered that the party system does depend on institutions and in particular on the electoral system but not only for the parliamentary elections but for all elections that are held in the country. All the new electoral systems that have been introduced for European elections, and the Scottish and Welsh elections, should be done away with as well as the the presidential type television debates

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