

PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

Salvation of the Left or Gift to the Right?

Gareth Stephenson Feb 2024

'Like the famous Trojan horse, Proportional Representation as a tool of Electoral Reform promises a great deal while ultimately proving to be the vehicle that transports the enemy through the gate.'

I realise this may seem a controversial position to adopt among some people on the left but I have endeavoured to ensure my opinions are as far as possible firmly grounded in facts. In that spirit I ask any comrade reading this piece to at least approach the article and this subject with an open mind.

I wish to pose the following questions and will provide the only answers I feel are reasonable based on the evidence, in my conclusions and summary at the end.

HOW SHOULD WE APPROACH ORGANISING AND CAMPAIGNING FOR SOCIALISM?

WHAT DO WE WANT TO ACHIEVE AS SOCIALISTS?

WHAT HAS PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION ACHIEVED?

IS PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION MORE DEMOCRATIC THAN FIRST PAST THE POST?

I will commence this piece by referencing a couple of articles from first James Ball who is a well known broadly left journalist who has written for a number of newspapers and journals, from whom I quote using an article he wrote for The New European., and an article by Benjamin Studebaker who is an American with a PhD in Politics and International Studies from the University of Cambridge. I have also quoted from a study published by Cambridge University Press and used an excerpt from an Al Jazeera program produced by Dr. Myriam Francois.

I will include during and at the end of each of the brief summaries of these articles, my own thoughts about them and conclude with a general view on the subject of proportional representation and electoral reform more broadly.

***Where I have used bold or Capitals to emphasise a point being made in the articles I quote, the emphasis is mine and not the original authors.**

Starting with Ball's article where he makes three main points.

'PR won't kill off the Tories but could bolster the far right.'

Firstly, Ball cautions the left *'not to be seduced by local election results as they rarely if ever translate in to National results for at least two reasons, those being -*
a) local Government candidates often do not reflect their party's national agenda and
b) are often more conservative even when coming from Lib Dems and Greens meaning a smaller vote for the Tories at local Government elections is not necessarily a less Conservative vote.'

Secondly, *'most of Europe uses PR and NOWHERE has it kept out the centre right but **has** ushered in the Far Right.'*

Thirdly, Ball makes this critical point. He says, *'that if PR were introduced here now, and the Lib Dems refused to enter into a pre-election "confidence and supply" agreement with the Tories, the Tories with little choice and perhaps even less compunction would enter in to such an agreement with the far right.'*
Do any of us, not believe that?

Following from the arguments presented by Ball, there is at least one conclusion that can be drawn if one accepts the likelihood of the Tories working with the far right. (A proposition I personally don't find difficult to accept as increasingly it seems the far right is simply the centre right with the mask pulled off). That conclusion, particularly in circumstances where UKIP's latest incarnation Reform UK are polling around 14% in former Labour seats referred to as the Red Wall, is that PR would see the far right go from being fringe dwellers to actually being IN GOVERNMENT.

This would be not unlike the situation currently in existence in New Zealand. New Zealand is a country which as part of the New World was (although founded in the spirit of European conquest and colonisation), for many decades a shining example of race relations established and fostered in a spirit of mutual respect.

Following the defeat of the Ardern Labour Government in 2023 and the formation of a National Party minority Government that is in coalition with New Zealand First and Association of Consumers and Taxpayers (ACT) there is not only a return to the politics of neo-liberal economics but sadly an attempt to wind back decades of measures designed to address inequality and boost Maori presence. In an election campaign that stood out from previous campaigns for it's emphasis on race, New Zealand First and ACT of course both denied their policies were racist but instead were 'promoting the equal rights of all New Zealanders'. These people, though clearly not representing the majority of New Zealanders, are now in Government and shaping policy that is at the very least regressive. It is instructive to note the following – ACT received **5.45%** of the vote, New Zealand First received **2.8%**.

Another example is France.

In a recent four part series 'France in Focus' which concentrates in part on the rise of the far right in France in an episode titled 'Flirting with the Far Right' produced by Dr. Myriam Francois who is a British film and documentary maker, one of her guests notes the accommodating if not welcoming role of the centre right in the mainstreaming of far right ideas.

The guest, Aurelion Mondon said that the notion that the far right is new or arises on its own is nonsense. It was not true in the 1930's and is not true now. He makes the point that it is the mainstream politicians that normalise far right ideas and the mainstream media that offers the far right the platform they need. Importantly he finishes this point by saying that the idea that fascism originates in poor, white working class areas due to dissatisfaction or anger is a fallacy as the right wing ideas the working class go on to voice are as previously stated, not their own ideas but ideas originating in the CENTRE right.

The reason why this is important is because it is the so-called centre right establishment that provides the far right with its veneer of respectability **but surely it is PR that provides it with its political access.**

The point here being that France as one of the only European countries outside of the UK to NOT have PR has kept the far right out of Government or coalition.

From Benjamin Studebaker's* article.

'PR is a terrible idea that the Left should not embrace.'

Studebaker says that, *'although the electoral road is never easy for the left, an electoral system that forces coalitions as a matter of procedure, only makes things worse.'* He says he can see the attraction or at least understand the attraction because under PR, left wing third parties would win more seats than possible under the two party system. (Here, Studebaker is making the distinction between genuinely left wing parties as opposed to the Democrats in the US as we would distinguish between ourselves and the British Labour Party).

Studebaker notes however that the first thing that happens with the introduction of PR is that the number of parties expands. Particular parties also become isolated from one another AND from the general public. He says, *'When parties can secure seats in the legislature by speaking to small percentages of the electorate there is a strong incentive to specialise, to focus on some small part of the electorate instead of the WORKING CLASS as a whole.'*

He uses The Netherlands as an example where there are many parties often focussing on very narrow, specific slices of the electorate. In the Lower House there are 16 different parties and even in the upper house 14. As Studebaker explains, *'There's a party for democratic socialists, a party for social democrats, a party for environmentalists, a party for social liberals, a party for conservative liberals, a party for liberal conservatives, a party for economic liberals, two distinct parties for*

Christian democrats, a couple of right wing populist parties, a party for Calvinists, a party for people who care about animal rights, and a party specifically for people over the age of 50. The last time any of these parties won more than 30% of the vote, the year was 1989.'

Turning his attention specifically to the UK he draws on the example of the Lib Dems in coalition with the Tories following the 2010 election, to make the point that *'there is a big difference between how a party might campaign and the manner in which coalitions operate.'* *The Liberal Democrats felt compelled to abandon their pre-election manifesto promise regarding abolition of tertiary education fees ...'* and in my view, that position actually highlights a dual problem for the left.

On the one hand is the specific issue of the tertiary fees itself and on the other is the choice to govern with the Tories in the first place. Not only did the Liberal Democrats fail miserably in just about every respect, including making any progress on the issue closest to their heart – PR – but they betrayed their true establishment nature by allowing the Tories to govern at all.

Just as in 1929 when their predecessors went in to coalition with Labour, the Liberal Party were in league with the Government's creditors to maintain the Gold Standard and balance the budget. As that Government fell apart and a new Government led by the Conservatives came to power, the Liberals simply teamed up with them to prevent any kind of left wing agenda.

Studebaker makes the point by stating that *'these centrist parties are capitalisms watchdogs. They keep an eye on left leaning Governments and ensure they don't step out of line. They heavily limit what left wing governments can do. Left led coalitions function as if they were the democratic party but no matter how big the left is, it is the centrists within the coalitions that ultimately determine what left wing policies get through. If they don't get what they want, these centrists co-operate with the right to destroy left wing governments.'*

This is what Studebaker calls *'A Ghetto for the Left'*. He describes how in Germany, the left (unless you consider the Social Democrats as genuinely left) have never governed due to the skilful manipulation of the right together with a range of centrist parties that includes The Greens. The genuinely left wing party Die Linke (The Left) simply doesn't get a look in and it's not because they don't get enough votes!

The article finishes with an especially good analysis that Studebaker calls, '*Non Dynamic Democratic Institutions*'. He concludes that there are basically four possible outcomes under PR.

*1. A government with the left as the senior partner and the **centre** as the junior.*

*2. A government with the **centre** as the senior partner and the left as the junior.*

*3. A government with the **centre** as the senior partner and the right as the junior.*

*4. A government with the right as the senior partner and the **centre** as the junior.*

There is basically no way to keep the centre out and therefore nothing changes. PR does not facilitate change.

Regarding the point that Studebaker makes with respect to the 2010 election result, it would not be unreasonable to counter that it was a result that came under First Past The Post (FPTP) and not PR.. I would argue however that it is instructive precisely because it was so anomalous of FPTP in that it is extremely rare for FPTP to result in the need for formal coalitions whereas it is the ever present feature of PR - AND it is a home grown example of how the capitalist establishment parties will band together in order to frustrate any progressive agenda.

From the Cambridge University study published in 2015.

'Is Proportional Representation more favourable to the Left? Electoral Rules and their impact on Elections, Parliaments and the formation of Cabinets.'

In an extremely lengthy study that people can read for themselves if inclined, the paper commences with an analysis of what is (at first) described as the '**robust finding that countries with majoritarian (FPTP) rules, more often elect conservative governments than those with PR.**'

It looks at three things. Voting behaviour, electoral geography (*basically constituency boundaries*) and the question of party fragmentation. In the first part, with regard to party fragmentation this study suggests that '*in reality neither the left nor right are fragmented in the lower house but are both seriously fragmented in the upper house where PR exists.*'

The problem with this study - for our purposes – is that it is extremely detailed, lengthy and complex and would potentially take hours to unpick. It is therefore necessary to 'cut to the chase' so to speak.

The study concludes – *'Our findings confirm that FPTP has a substantially conservative bias but that PR systems present a more **nuanced** picture. **In light of our results, the overall bias of electoral systems however, seems to be less pronounced than formerly claimed.'***

I have included this report in part because it says, *'In Majoritarian systems **the spatial distribution of votes** explains a rightward bias the ideological bent of governments under PR however, is determined mainly by **party fragmentation.**'*

If spatial distribution (using the spatial voting theory that describes how voters compare their own opinions on important issues with those of different parties) is producing or at least leaning towards a right wing bias in a FPTP voting system there are two possible reasons in my view.

One is that the system is flawed. Supporters of PR would argue this is because of the Winner Takes All nature of FPTP whereas I would argue that the reason is far more complex and goes to the issue of political campaigning in a system dominated by an undemocratic and extremely right wing media, amongst other things. Or is it perhaps just that voting patterns are resulting in outcomes where peoples choices are accurately reflected in the overall result?

If it is the latter, the problem is not FPTP, the problem is people not engaging with socialism and that is not a problem that's going to be solved by PR locking socialists into perpetual coalition – or I would argue, perpetual **opposition** due to the nature of those coalitions.

With regard to party fragmentation brought on by PR, we have already seen from the Studebaker article how damaging it can be. Recall (as referred to on page three of this article) how Studebaker makes the point that PR encourages fragmentation resulting in the left failing to address the working class as a whole, instead concentrating effectively on the minimum required to get your 'own' people elected. Hardly a recipe for mobilising people for change.

A couple of other observations about the Cambridge study.

Firstly, with regard to the finding about fragmentation in the upper house. Interestingly, in Australia, PR exists only in the upper house of parliament – the Senate. Although ironically it uses a system in the lower house that I would support as a sound electoral reform, (that is **not** PR), Australia also provides a salutary example of why PR is so bad, particularly for the Left as the election of the Australian upper house not only – with unerring consistency – throws up a small band consisting of the confused, politically illiterate and right wing extremes, but is also the body responsible for the downfall and ultimately undemocratic dismissal of Australia's only ever Socialist Government in 1975.

The other point worthy of noting in the Cambridge study is about 'nuanced' results. I think in many respects the entire report from this body is fairly, though probably inadvertently, biased.

A person reading this study who is - perhaps like many people – persuaded that capitalism represents the end of history and the embodiment of democracy, therefore effectively excluding socialism as a viable alternative, may read the results here (in spite of the honest conclusion that really PR is not offering 'the left' much different to what it can expect from FPTP), as an endorsement of PR.

In other words, the study's authors are in my view, using the term 'left' in a very broad sense and happy to conclude that really any so-called centre left party (certainly not the world view that we take), is representative of change.

At that point however, one must surely question the meaning of 'nuanced'. It doesn't strike me as much of an endorsement unless your ambitions are restricted to slightly left wing capitalism. Labour anybody?

MY CONCLUSIONS

I'll start with the questions I posed at the outset.

HOW SHOULD WE APPROACH ORGANISING AND CAMPAIGNING FOR SOCIALISM?

Under PR, the only thing any party needs to do to have some parliamentary representation is appeal to their own support base – no need to convince anyone else of your case. The temptation to narrow the base rather than expand one's horizons to reach out to the entire working class, has proven too great for other socialist parties – particularly in Europe. Or perhaps it's simply a shrug of the shoulders acceptance on the part of left parties of the built in limitations of PR.

Only by winning under FPTP – as in need of reform that may be – can Socialists hope to win a majority that would allow the implementation of a socialist agenda without right wing interference.

WHAT DO WE WANT TO ACHIEVE AS SOCIALISTS?

Do we want to achieve actual Socialism or simply an amelioration of the very worst aspects of capitalism? The truth is that even that modest ambition has hardly been achieved as we see neo-liberalism run rampant. PR is not only a failure to keep out the centre right, it is most certainly not a path to Government and real change.

Surely it is our party's aims and objectives that dictate what we want to achieve and that will require winning government in our own right.

-7-

WHAT HAS PR ACHIEVED?

Other than the entrenchment of capitalism under the guise of democracy I would argue, not much.

IS PR MORE DEMOCRATIC THAN FPTP?

One might say that PR is more democratic because by its nature it ensures representation for virtually everyone and if that is what you believe, that even the fascists should have a parliamentary voice because that's what democracy has delivered – then by all means say Yes to PR.

But it does raise the question of whether we live in a genuine democracy. In an environment where the multi-millionaire owners of our media are free to lie, where public services including education are so geared towards depriving the poor, where political life is so obviously corrupt and our justice system does not serve people or dispense justice equally, then surely even the political views that tend towards people making choices that are patently hostile to their own interests, democracy is a farce and a tyranny.

Democracy surely isn't just about how you vote but what you are exposed to on the way to voting AND what we have is an entire system dedicated to the perpetuation of capitalism. Therefore if you don't think we live in a genuine democracy – say NO to PR – because the introduction of PR will not change a system which is clearly undemocratic but simply open it to the far right.

IN SUMMARY

Based on all the evidence above, it is my firm belief that Proportional Representation as a vehicle to take socialists in to Government is something of a fantasy in that it simply doesn't deliver what its proponents hope for – and worse – claim for it. In spite of having existed as a voting system for decades and in many countries around the world – indeed in virtually every country in Europe – it has not only failed to deliver socialism, it has spectacularly failed to keep out the right even to the extent of ushering in the far right.

FPTP – it can be argued – has also failed to deliver socialism. This has more to do with a failure to convince people of the need for the change we seek – and let's face it – the Labour Party is the main reason for that failure. And here there are two points worth making.

One – greater party unity under the leadership of Corbyn may possibly, indeed probably, have seen a socialist Labour party win office in 2017.

Two – how many of us could honestly say we would continue as enthusiastic

supporters of PR, giving smaller and probably right wing parties an entry to parliament to disrupt a socialist platform had Labour won in 2017? I mean really, why would we?

-8-

Another reason why FPTP has not delivered a socialist government (although it could be argued that it did so in 1945) is because it has two fatal flaws. One is that it does from time to time have unfair boundaries leading to gerrymandered constituencies, and secondly the fact it leads to people being elected with less than 50% of the vote – or more specifically – with more than 50% of electors voting against them.

So, an argument against the deeply flawed system of PR which has failed entirely to deliver any of the promised benefits it's advocates claim and as demonstrated over and over again has actually amplified the voice of the far right, is not by any means an argument against electoral reform.

Electoral reform is of course a much larger subject that would take in such issues as the need or not, for an upper house and what it's powers might be and how it's elected. Is there a place for the leader of a party that wins the popular vote but falls short on the number of seats required to form government? And of course there's the question of constituency boundaries and no doubt other issues also. This document is specifically dealing with PR but if there was a simple reform that would improve our current system it is, in my view the introduction of a preferential voting system such as that enshrined in our own SJP constitution for internal elections.

It is the system used for the election of the **lower** house of parliament in Australia and does prevent a candidate being elected with less than 50% of the vote. And as I said earlier in this paper, it is **not** the system used in the Australian **upper** house which uses PR with disastrous consequences.

As Socialists we must surely want to introduce socialism as the economic structure of government. NOWHERE has this been achieved through PR. What we would get more than likely, is a few socialists elected or maybe even more than a few, who will be prevented through the lack of a majority which is a result virtually guaranteed by PR (and the reason why it's no particular threat to the establishment) from pursuing a socialist agenda.

This is not a guess – it is the reality of PR demonstrated again and again. If there is an example of where this is not the case, where PR has resulted in the election of a socialist government, where PR has not ushered in the far right, where it has not resulted in voter disillusionment, it is in a place I don't know about.

The question of whether or not to adopt PR as a policy objective goes to the very heart of what a socialist party really stands for. For our part, we in the Social Justice Party have a party objective that states unequivocally, our aim to achieve socialism. Can this aim be met through a voting system (PR), which is built on the foundation of coalition and compromise that favours the existing ruling class?

The establishment of socialism requires nothing less than the overthrow of capitalism. If this is to be achieved through the electoral system, it is simply not possible under PR. Proportional Representation by its nature is designed to support the status quo.

Our job as socialists is not to abandon the dream in favour of short term gratification that results in compromise. Our job as socialists is to work unceasingly to convince the working class, our fellow citizens, of the inescapable logic of our case.

Our mission is to achieve Socialism. PR is not the vehicle to do that.

***Studebaker describes himself as a political theorist and is clearly left wing. He has written a number of highly recommendable articles, essays and pamphlets, including on the issue of 'left wing' liberalism versus Marxism.**

