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The Worst of All Worlds? Electoral Reform and Britain's 2009 European Elections

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At the general election of 2005, Britain's traditional electoral system—first past the post (FPTP)—took quite a kicking. And there was plenty for its critics to kick against. Two-thirds of MPs had been elected with a minority vote, the Liberal Democrats had again been under-represented in Parliament (11 per cent of seats in return for 22 per cent of votes), a government had been elected with just 35 per cent of votes cast, and turnout had been a meagre 61 per cent—partly caused, it was argued, by FPTP's tendency to produce 'safe' seats where voting seemed pointless. FPTP's supporters, it seemed, were on the back foot.

Britain's next nationwide election—the election of its Members of the European Parliament (MEPs)—took place in June 2009. This election used the 'party list' form of proportional representation (PR): the third time since 1999 that Britain had elected its MEPs in this way. So this represented another opportunity to assess alternative electoral systems—not on the basis of theory, or elections overseas, but according to hard empirical evidence here in the United Kingdom. In other words, here was a chance for electoral reformers, and their opponents, to sharpen their knives and adopt a more aggressive stance in relation to FPTP's continued use at Westminster.

How were things organised?

By 2009, the United Kingdom's MEPs had been reduced in total from 78 to 72. Consequently, most voters now had fewer politicians representing them in the European Parliament. Voters in the North West, for example, having once had ten MEPs, now had 'only' eight. Yet in most other respects there was organisational continuity between the United Kingdom's Euro elections of 2009 and those of 1999 and 2004:

- The United Kingdom was divided into 12 regions: Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and nine areas of England (North West, North East, Yorkshire and Humberside, East Midlands, West Midlands, East, London, South East and South West).
- Reflecting population, these regions returned a variable number of MEPs—from three in the North East to ten in the South East.
- Northern Ireland used a PR system known as 'Single Transferable Vote'; elsewhere the 'closed' party list system was employed.
- Outside Northern Ireland, voters placed an 'X' next to one party list; in keeping with the 'closed' nature of the British list system, voters could not endorse a particular candidate.
- Outside Northern Ireland, the D'Hondt formula was used to count votes and allocate seats. With reference to Scotland, Table 1 indicates how this worked in practice.

A PR triumph?

The Liberal Democrats, always in the vanguard of Britain's electoral reform campaign, quickly claimed that the 2009

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Table 1: Votes and seat allocation on Scotland (six MEPs)*

	SNP	Labour	Conservatives	Liberal Democrats	Green	United Kingdom Independence Party
Total vote	321,007	229,853	185,794	127,038	80,442	57,788
Round 1	321,007	229,853	185,794	127,038	80,442	57,788
Round 2	160,504	229,853	185,794	127,038	80,442	57,788
Round 3	160,504	229,853	185,794	127,038	80,442	57,788
Round 4	160,504	114,927	92,897	127,038	80,442	57,788
Round 5	107,002	114,927	92,897	127,308	80,442	57,788
Round 6	107,002	114,927	92,897	63,519	80,442	57,788
Seat outcome	2	2	1	1	0	0

* *Round 1*: SNP tops poll. SNP's highest-ranked candidate elected. *Round 2*: D'Hondt formula applies: 'original vote of party that has just won a seat is now divided by number of seats is has plus one'. Labour now has highest vote; Labour's highest ranked candidate elected. *Round 3*: Labour's vote is thus divided by two. Conservatives now have highest vote. Conservatives' highest ranked candidate elected. *Round 4*: Conservative vote is thus divided by two. SNP now has highest vote. SNP's second highest ranked candidate elected. *Round 5*: SNP's original vote is thus divided by three. Liberal Democrats now have highest vote. Liberal Democrats highest ranked

elections were a vindication of PR. Indeed, they argued that it was now absurd for Westminster to continue using FPTP, given that most other British elections (European, mayoral, Welsh and Greater London Assemblies, Scottish Parliament and Scottish councils) used alternative systems. Lord Rennard, the Lib Dems' chief electoral strategist, insisted that the 2009 elections 'cemented' PR in Britain, and that there were 'clear signs' of voters 'appreciating its strengths' (*Guardian*, 11 June). What evidence was there to support such PR-friendly arguments?

Proportionate outcomes

Upholding the raison d'être of PR, party list did produce a fairly symmetrical relationship between the parties' share of votes and their allocation of seats. Under FPTP, it is safe to assume that the sort of vote share achieved by the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and the Lib Dems would have been accompanied by some worthy second places but very few seats. Instead, thanks to PR, UKIP's 16 per cent of votes was rewarded with 19 per cent of the seats, while the Lib Dems' 14 per cent vote share resulted in a 16 per cent share of the seats.

Averted injustice

In providing such proportionate outcomes, PR averted other forms of unfairness. It was estimated, for example, that under FPTP Labour would have won all three seats in the North East, despite getting just 25 per cent of votes; instead, the seats were shared with the Tories and Lib Dems (polling 20 and 18 per cent, respectively). In Wales, Labour failed to win a plurality of votes for the first time since 1918, polling just 20 per cent. Yet given the concentrated nature of Labour's Welsh support, Labour under FPTP might still have won a majority of the Welsh seats, while the Tories—the most popular party among Welsh voters—might have won no seats at all (see Table 2).

Fewer wasted votes/widening of voter choice

Under FPTP, support for smaller parties usually amounts to 'wasted votes'. Under the Westminster electoral system, it is virtually certain that the 8 per cent of votes won by the Greens, and the 6 per cent won by the British National Party (BNP), would not have given them any seats. However, the seats won by these minor parties show that the wasted vote problem recedes under PR. As a result, realistic voter choice is widened, allowing voters to 'experiment' without compromising the significance of their ballot paper.

Broader representation

One of the problems of FPTP is that it involves single-member constituencies, where many voters feel alienated from their MP—for example, a voter with centre-left views, living in a safe Conservative seat, may not feel properly represented. Under PR, this problem is alleviated by the presence of multi-member constituencies, giving voters a choice of representatives from a variety of parties. In Britain, this was clearly illustrated following the 2009 European elections, which left every voter with MEPs from at least three different parties. Indeed, in the North West, London, the South East and Yorkshire/Humberside, voters now have representatives from five different parties, thus ensuring that, should they need to access an MEP, there should be at least one with whom they can empathise politically.

Reflected a diverse society

Britain is no longer a straightforward, two-dimensional society based on social

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Table 2: Regional vote share and seat allocation (percentage/number of seats)

Region	Labour	Conservatives	Liberal Democrats	United Kingdom Independence Party	Green	Scottish National Party/Plaid Cymru	British National Party
North East	25 (1)	20 (1)	18 (1)	15 (0)	6 (0)	n/a	9 (0)
North West	20 (2)	26 (3)	14 (1)	16 (1)	8 (0)	n/a	8 (1)
Yorks/Humber	19 (1)	24 (2)	13 (1)	17 (1)	8 (0)	n/a	10 (1)
East Midlands	17 (1)	30 (2)	12 (1)	16 (1)	7 (0)	n/a	9 (0)
West Midlands	17 (1)	28 (2)	12 (1)	21 (2)	6 (0)	n/a	9 (0)
East	10 (1)	31 (3)	14 (1)	20 (2)	9 (0)	n/a	6 (0)
London	21 (2)	27 (3)	14 (1)	11 (1)	11 (1)	n/a	5 (0)
South East	8 (1)	35 (4)	14 (2)	19 (2)	12 (1)	n/a	4 (0)
South West	8 (0)	30 (3)	17 (1)	22 (2)	9 (0)	n/a	4 (0)
Scotland	21 (2)	17 (1)	11 (1)	5 (0)	7 (0)	29 (2)	2 (0)
Wales	20 (1)	21 (1)	11 (1)	13 (0)	6 (0)	18 (1)	5 (0)

Table 3: Summary of voting in Great Britain

Party	Number of votes	Percentage of votes	Number of seats	Seats change since 2004
Conservatives	4,198,644	27.7	25	+1
United Kingdom Independence Party	2,498,226	16.5	13	+1
Labour	2,381,760	15.7	13	–5
Liberal Democrats	2,080,613	13.7	11	+1
Green	1,303,745	8.6	2	–
British National Party	943,598	6.2	2	+2
Scottish National Party	321,007	29.1*	2	–
Plaid Cymru	126,702	18.5*	1	–

* Refers to Scotland/Wales only.

class. This was reflected in the 2005 general election, when the two traditional, class-based parties—Labour and the Tories—polled just 67 per cent of votes (the figure had been 97 per cent in 1951). However, due to the vagaries of FPTP, the two main parties still won almost 90 per cent of the seats at Westminster, thus vitiating Parliament's claim to be a voice of the nation. The 2009 Euro elections showed even more starkly the diversity of modern voting behaviour, with just 43 per cent of voters backing the traditional governing parties. And, owing to PR, this was duly reflected in the make-up of Britain's MEPs—who are now drawn from eight different parties. Party list thus ensured that British MEPs reflect the multifaceted nature of modern British society and the fragmentation of party support among voters.

Abetted gender equality

The under-representation of women in British politics is a nagging issue, and despite some change since 1997, women still comprise only a fifth of MPs. This situation is arguably compounded by FPTP, which permits parties to choose just one candidate per constituency, which may encourage them to be conservative in their selection. By contrast, PR's multi-member constituencies allow parties to field a team of socially, sexually and ethnically diverse candidates. Furthermore, by allowing such candidates to be given a high ranking, the closed list system enables major parties to assure the election of candidates from under-represented groups. By 2009, 33 per cent of Britain's MEPs were women. In 1994, when British MEPs were last elected by FPTP, the figure was just 18 per cent.

A PR disaster?

Despite the points made above, defenders of FPTP also felt exonerated by the 2009 elections, arguing that the 'inherent' flaws of PR had again been exposed, but also claiming (in respect of the BNP) that the elections highlighted a problem previously unforeseen by electoral reformers in Britain (Table 3).

Limited intelligibility

Although there is nothing complicated about the method of *voting* under party list, the method of *counting* is tortuous and arcane (see Table 1). In a representative democracy, it is important that voters understand how their representatives come to be elected. In this sense, FPTP is admirable: it is transparently obvious why one candidate wins and the others lose. Yet thanks to the D'Hondt formula, the same cannot be said of party list. A survey carried out by BBC Radio Manchester again found fewer than 5 per cent of voters able to explain how winners and losers were determined. At a time when there is already a disconnection between voters and the political elite, such figures suggest that PR—far from rebooting our democracy—may only alienate voters further from their politicians.

Low turnout

These anxieties were borne out by the United Kingdom's low turnout (34.5 per cent). Although this represents a marked improvement on the 23 per cent turnout in 1999 (when party list was first used), it represents a 4 per cent drop since 2004, thus weakening claims that voters are 'getting used to' PR. When assessing claims that voters eventually acclimatise to new systems, it is also worth noting that turnout in Scotland was just 28 per cent. Thanks to Scottish Parliament elections (in 1999, 2003 and 2007), plus Scottish council elections in 2007, voters in Scotland have had more exposure than most Britons to PR. Yet Scottish voters in 2009 were even less galvanised by PR than voters elsewhere in Britain, register-

ing a turnout 6 per cent below the national average. It cannot be proved, of coursel, that complex PR systems have actually depressed turnout in Britain. However, we can assert that PR has manifestly failed to fulfil one of its supporters' key aims—*viz*, greater public interest in elections. It is also significant that United Kingdom turnout in the 2009 European elections was lower than in 1994 (when British MEPs were last elected by FPTP).

Depersonalised voting

As in the previous two Euro elections, letters to local newspapers showed unease that voters could only choose a party rather than an individual (*Manchester Evening News*, 27 May; North Wales *Daily Post*, 3 June). This aspect of PR has always struck many as bizarre, given the weakened attachment between voters and parties and the growing support for independents and maverick candidates—especially in local and mayoral elections. (This trend was continued on the same day as the Euro elections when the Doncaster mayoral election was won by an 'English Democrat'.) The closed list system seemed especially perverse by June 2009, following the *Daily Telegraph*'s recent exposure of MPs' expenses. More than ever, it seemed, voters wished to give a verdict about individual politicians rather than their parties; more than ever, the 'incumbency factor' in British elections looked vital. Yet while FPTP provides an outlet for such anger, it is structurally denied by the constraints of closed party list.

Voters diminished, selectors exalted

Linked to the above was resentment at the enhanced importance of party managers. In the North West, for example, quite an impact was made by a young Labour candidate, who had 'almost single-handedly tried to rescue his party's flagging reputation among core Labour voters' (*Manchester Evening News*, 27 May). However, those voters could not register support for this candidate without voting for his less respected Labour colleagues. And even if they voted for the admired candidate's party, he stood no chance of election due to his low ranking on Labour's list (an example of how PR produces a new variant of 'wasted votes'). Meanwhile, the main parties' highest ranked candidates were effectively guaranteed election, regardless of their reputation among voters. Closed list thus pointed to a transfer of power from ordinary voters to party selectors: a reality wholly at odds with the public mood in 2009.

Defective representation

The creation of large constituencies, with a plurality of MEPs, caused further problems for representative democracy (Table 2). In the North West, for example, serious questions arose about the precise role of its eight MEPs. Who did what? Did the MEPs divide the region's responsibilities between them? If so, how? Was a particular MEP responsible for a particular part of the region, or all of it? Leaving aside the fact that we could not actually vote for or against individuals, which MEP did we blame if we felt our representation was poor, and which MEP did we credit if we thought it was good? And how could a constituency's interests be articulated meaningfully when the constituency was so large? Indeed, was it possible to express 'the interests of the North West', when those interests were so diverse, ranging from affluent commuters in Wilmslow to inner-city tenants in Moss Side, and from those living in Carlisle to those living 120 miles south in Congleton? Consequently, the Euro elections were a sharp reminder that an electoral system like FPTP, with its smallish constituencies and clear lines of

responsibility, has merits that should not be under-rated.

Footholds for fascists

Traditionally, PR was a cause associated with 'centrist' parties like the Lib Dems. As such, it has been closely linked to calls for a more consensual (or 'moderate') form of politics, one that would outlaw both left- and right-wing extremism. It has been assumed, perforce, that coalitions arising from PR will have a centripetal effect on British government, uniting 'decent' middle-of-the-road politicians in pursuit of 'common sense' policies. However, as we saw in 2009, PR can also advance extremist parties like the BNP: parties who would have no chance of winning seats under FPTP and who, in the event of a hung Parliament, could have a *centrifugal*, or immoderate, effect on the conduct of a coalition (as happened ten years ago in Austria). In the wake of the Euro elections, it was already clear that by enabling the BNP to win seats and added legitimacy—with just 6 per cent of votes—PR was having an anti-centrist effect on our political culture (the BBC, for example, was obliged to give the BNP leader a place on *Question Time*). It remains to be seen how much this will affect mainstream debate. Yet one thing is certain: had Britain continued to elect its MEPs under first-past-the-post, Nick Griffin would have remained an obscurity rather than a seemingly important political figure.

Statistical glitches

Reformers often argue that such aspects of PR are a fair price for a more proportionate outcome. Yet closer scrutiny shows that PR does not avert disproportionality and statistical anomalies. In 2009, for example:

- The Tories polled 10 per cent more votes than the Lib Dems in Wales, but only won the same number of Welsh seats.
- Labour polled 10 per cent more votes than the Lib Dems in Scotland, but only won the same number of Scottish seats.
- The BNP won a seat in the North West with 8 per cent of votes; but UKIP won no seats in Wales and the North East, despite getting 13 and 15 per cent of votes, respectively.
- The Greens won over 360,000 more votes nationwide than the BNP, but won only the same number of seats (two).
- The Tories won just 28 per cent of votes nationwide, but took over 40 per cent of the seats.

In summary, PR seems to create fresh problems for British democracy, while failing to banish the mathematical disorders bedeviling FPTP. For defenders of the status quo at Westminster, this raises an obvious question: does PR give us the worst of all worlds?

Conclusion: reappraisals and realignments

In one sense, Britain's 2009 Euro elections did not alter the key question for any electoral reform debate—namely, what is an electoral system *for*? Is it to provide single-party governments that are ready-made, quickly-changed, durable and capable of bold, decisive action *a la Thatcher* (in which case FPTP looks good)? Or is it to provide a legislature where the parties' share of votes is similar to their share of seats (in which case PR looks better)? It used to be assumed that the answer to this question was heavily influenced by political preferences. Those favouring centrist politics were often drawn to PR (*qua* coalitions between 'moderates'), while those favouring right- or left-wing radicalism tended to defend FPTP (*qua* 'strong', single-party government).

Yet the success of the BNP has muddied the waters. Those on the centre-left

must now ask whether PR would, after all, embed 'progressive' politics and sideline the right—or actually do the reverse? As a result, the case for and against coalition government, to which arguments over PR at Westminster are bound, have been ideologically neutralised in the wake of the 2009 Euro elections. Put another way, we are now more likely to consider the merits of coalitions in a 'secular' way, free from any assumptions about their political direction.

In this respect, the recent CDU–FDP coalition (formed after Germany's 2009 general election) is helpful. As the FDP excites horror in neither *Telegraph* nor *Guardian* circles, this allows us to focus on a crucial question: should a party (such as the FDP) be in power when it polled just 15 per cent of votes in the election? Should a party leader (such as the FDP's Guido Westerwelle) be foreign minister and *de facto* deputy prime minister when his party comes third? Are we reconciled to the fact that proportional representation in a legislature produces disproportional representation in an executive? If not, then the case for PR seems precarious.

A few months after the Euro elections, Gordon Brown declared a renewed interest in electoral reform, and promised a referendum if Labour stayed in power after 2010. However, the new system he posited was not PR, but 'Alternative Vote': one that would be of little help to smaller parties (like the BNP and Greens) and one that would leave open the possibility of single-party government. In terms of Westminster, the future of FPTP looks far from secure. The case for PR seems seriously damaged—with its detractors less predictable, and more eclectic, than they once were.

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