

Redefining our political process and culture: the introduction of PR is the place to start

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Respect for our political system and culture has never been so low, nor politicians so distrusted, as a recent report reveals¹. Such low levels place our very democratic system at risk. Despite this, the 2024 election manifestoes once again show that the main parties have no plans for major reform, nor even seem to understand the threat to cohesion caused by our outdated political process and culture. These complacent views are protected by a self-serving and detached political class of media, think tanks, consultants and advisers, that surround our politicians.

Proportional representation (PR) has the potential to create fundamental change, but neither this, nor other reforms, are on the agenda. PR can, of course, be justified on the very basic grounds of democratic fairness, making every voice count and creating a wider representation. But, it is much more fundamental than that. First-past-the-post (FPTP) underpins a whole raft of political systems and behaviours that pervade our politics. In particular, it creates an 'us and them' culture, which sours the political discourse, undermines collaboration and any sense of unified purpose.

It is especially alarming to note that nearly 60% of electors say none of the main political parties represent them and describe themselves as politically 'homeless'². Not surprisingly there has also been a dramatic slump in their political party membership. Minority parties do of course offer a theoretical choice for electors, but they can receive millions of votes in national elections without gaining a single seat. This effective disenfranchisement has created a real sense of frustration and anger, that increasingly boils over in the popular discourse - especially social media which, ironically, is the main source of the abuse that MPs complain about. The political narrative is thus dominated by two parties who represent not just a minority of voters, but a much smaller minority of political opinion. The consequence is that the electorate has become frustrated and angry, with more than half now prepared to consider upending our democratic system altogether with the imposition of 'a strong leader who was willing to break the rules'³. - a cry for help from an unrepresented majority of voters.

¹ National Centre for Social Research (2024) 'Five Years of Unprecedented Challenges'<https://natcen.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/BSA%2041%20Five%20years%20of%20unprecedented%20challenges.pdf>

² Unherd 2023 <https://unherd.com/newsroom/over-60-of-britons-feel-politically-homeless/>

³ <https://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/blog/finding-of-support-for-a-'strong-leader'-helps-provoke-responses-to-2019>

Once elected by FPTP - based on the votes of only around 40% of electors - the Government can then completely dominate the day to day political agenda. In the name of 'strong government', they can ignore the views of the majority and refuse to accommodate the differences and diversity of others across the spectrum. More importantly, they can prevent proper scrutiny and accountability. Each new political disaster - of which the contaminated blood scandal is just the latest of a long line - is responded to in its own terms rather than seen as symptomatic of a much broader failure of governance.

A sense of political cohesion or unity can only be established if our political processes and culture are completely overhauled, but the most fundamental and emblematic reform would be the introduction of proportional representation. PR has the potential to begin to shape a new way of doing politics.

The Political Mindset

As the gulf between the electorate and its' representatives grows, politicians increasingly embody an uncompromising behaviour model, copied and extended by those on social media who now relish polarised and abusive debates. In fact, it seems to create a symbiotic relationship, contributing to polarisation and making citizens less willing to accept a rival's mandate⁴. It is also an echo of the work on community cohesion where the relationship between divided communities has resulted in tension and conflict⁵. Politicians who rightly complain that they have become the targets of abuse, have failed to recognise that they are actually helping to create such a climate.

The case for a fairer form of political representation has been well made by others and it is not intended to rehearse the many powerful arguments that have been put forward by the several leading organisations. And there are now fewer voices who dare to even try to defend the status quo - and who would certainly find it hard to champion the notion of 'strong government' today. In private, the main political parties keep a very tight lip, agreeing amongst themselves that it is just not in their interests to widen access to the corridors of power. They argue that they have other priorities, such as education reform, dealing with the cost of living crisis, or promoting growth. These are no doubt worthy plans, but without building wider support and tackling the divisive culture and behaviours, there is little chance of a competent delivery programme becoming established.

Satisfaction with democracy is declining in many countries, and it seems that this is especially the case where the confrontational FPTP election system remains in place and serves to funnel us into opposing tribes, with binary positions heightened still further by

⁴ Bennett Institute for Public Policy (2020) Global Satisfaction with Democracy p19. 2020. Centre for the Future of Democracy. https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/DemocracyReport2020_nYqqWi0.pdf

⁵ Cattle Ted (2021) Community Cohesion - coming of age at 21 years <https://www.belongnet-work.co.uk/resources/5880/>

social media.⁶ This mindset is also evident at the individual level. MPs are seemingly content to have their own view of the world reinforced by their supporters and followers. According to research by Sky News, MPs follow just 10 colleagues or less from other parties on social media⁷. In addition, the 'Westminster Bubble' means that MPs also tend to only follow the commentators that are known to support their own partisan views⁸ As Sky News wryly observed, this is all despite the fact that most politicians claim that they wish to unite the Country.⁹

It is possible that FPTP had a little more validity in a previous era of class-based politics, largely immune from international influences and without the recent agency of social media, disparate voices struggled to be heard. But in a more diverse nation, in which global connections are expressed through many new channels, this is no longer the case. Voting behaviour is also now segmented, often based on single issues, and with many different cultural references. The appeals of the existing political parties have been left behind. FPTP has therefore entrenched a re-enactment of past battles between two political parties that are no longer representative of public opinion.

Political parties recognise this, but rather than respond positively by creating a sense of unity around a broad based political agenda, they have chosen to cynically exploit it by targeting 'core' supporters and completely abandoning the canvassing of others. Election appeals are now built upon a sophisticated demographic analysis which are only intended to succeed in attracting a minority that is big enough to get them over the line. This is inherently divisive, but their tactics have degenerated still further. Politicians have learnt that, in terms of garnering just enough votes, it is necessary to try to build 'us and them' divides. So, we are now either 'Brexiters' or 'Remoaners', culture war 'woke' warriors or 'anti-woke' combatants, or subject to the cynical 'wedge issues' which politicians unashamedly create. There is nothing in between, no nuance nor middle ground in respect of any of these divides. Collaboration, cross party alliances or consensus seeking, is of no value in a 'winner takes all' race.

The Westminster political culture is developed from that of party political members who climbed through the ranks of local government where the FPTP system is also firmly embedded, in England at least. Perhaps for non-aligned observers, the collective groans of disapproval are most audible when politicians refuse to give a straight answer to press and media interview questions. Rather than concede that their opponents might have even half a point, or that their views might be challenged to just some extent by the evidence in front of them, they will simply rehearse their prescribed 'lines to take' No wonder that, according to the Hansard Society, the proportion of respondents who believed the system of government required either 'quite a lot' or a 'great deal' of improvement rose

⁶ Bennett Institute for Public Policy (2020) Global Satisfaction with Democracy p18/19. 2020. Centre for the Future of Democracy. https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/DemocracyReport2020_nYqqWi0.pdf

⁷ Sky News 31.10.19 <https://news.sky.com/story/revealed-the-digital-divide-between-our-politicians-11832327>

⁸ Politico (5th April 2019) <https://www.politico.eu/article/westminster-twitter-bubble-illustrated-guide-graphics/>

⁹ op cit 5

above 70% for the first time. This was 12 points higher than when the annual research first took place in 2004.¹⁰

The Fortress Mentality

Over the years politicians have learnt that gaining this minority position of power allowed them almost complete domination of the political agenda, with no need to listen to other views, nor to seek consensus or collaborate. As Labour's Chris Bryant MP notes 'once your party have won a general election....you can do pretty much what you want in parliament'¹¹. Thus, an elected minority assumes the powers to determine time allocated to debates, has almost complete control over the business in the house and can even determine when parliament should sit or its tenure determined. This has always evident in the ruling party's style of government, but has 'become far worse in recent years'.¹²

This is most evident to the public, during the charade of Prime Minister's Question Time when even the most reasonable of questions are turned into an opportunity for a soundbite for the press and media. And of course questions are not asked with a view to obtaining an answer, but simply to make a party political point. It is the same for virtually all parliamentary debates, there is little or no attempt to listen to either side and reach an agreement in the best interests of the country. Even in committee stages the division continues and the government of the day will refuse to accept an amendment, even when they know it would improve the legislation. In fact, former Conservative MP Rory Stewart says that he was informed of a three-line whip to vote against all Opposition amendments¹³.

But being in a minority can be precarious even if the Government actually has a majority in the House - fractures are not uncommon, especially as the skills of building alliances are almost unknown to politicians. So, a 'fortress mentality' has had to be continually reinforced by the introduction of new practices and processes which have largely gone unnoticed outside the political class. The petty tribal behaviours which are constantly on show are actually underpinned by very fundamental and anti-democratic practices to hobble impartial advice and to promote partisan politics. As Rory Stewart again revealed, the Whips' instruction was that MPs 'should not regard debates as opportunities for open discussion... we were expected to be loyal to the party: and votes would rarely entail a free exercise of judgment'¹⁴ and Stewart backed this with many examples of bullying behaviour more familiar in a Victorian workhouse. The bullying and abusive culture is not however, confined to the Whips. Chris Bryant MP provides as many examples of this cul-

¹⁰ Hansard Society 2019 Publication 8th April 2019

¹¹ Bryant Chris (2023) Code of Conduct - why we need to fix parliament and how to do it , p 50. Bloomsbury: London

¹² *ibid* p56

¹³ Stewart Rory (2023) *Politics On The Edge* p59 Jonathan Cape London

¹⁴ *ibid.* p52/53

ture among MPs themselves¹⁵, and confirms that it is ‘not just about individuals’ - but “ a set of systemic problems”¹⁶.

The very design of the House of Commons, with opposition and government MPs confronting each other across their benches, with 50 per cent more members crushed in to benches that they were designed for, could not be better suited to the creation of a mob mentality. The archaic voting lobbies, with the whips physically forcing people through pre-ordained directions, all add to the culture of division and enmity. And meanwhile, MPs manage not to even blush when they rail against the abusive behaviour on social media and the threats to free speech in our universities.

The Parliamentary culture is supported by the enveloping behaviours of a political class, consisting of advisors, partisan press and media, contractors and think tanks, which have become deeply embedded in our democratic system. This is particularly true of the Special Advisors (SpAds) whose mission is to second guess and direct the work of ministers, reinforcing the ‘lines to take’. The electorate has never sanctioned the appointment of these advisers (and one may ask why, when politicians are themselves chosen and elected for their political skills, they need an advisor offering the very same partisan skills) but there are now 117 SpAds at a cost of nearly £16m¹⁷, appointed from friends and family contacts, with only short term electoral gain in mind, seeking a quick headline to support the party line or discomfort political opponents. This is not difficult as they each make use of their public funds to build media contacts who wait for a story to spin, or feed off friendly think tank research that can quickly provide a favourable and supportive report (some MPs have now gone even further and actually appear as TV presenters to promote their own particular viewpoints). The SpAds vie with the opposition party’s own advisers, appointed in a similar way, and again funded by the Exchequer at a similar annual cost.¹⁸ They also vie with those in other departments to promote what a former senior minister called ‘internecine warfare between departments’¹⁹, no doubt adding to the present chaos of government.

The principal role of the SpAds is a nakedly partisan role of plotting how to target their core voters with a pithy headline in their media friendly supporters, or trying to exploit or unearth an indiscretion of their opponents, to the same party political end. Reform of the civil service has been deliberately neglected in order to justify the use of political advisers and turning government into a permanent campaigning machine, based upon the party lines established by the sharp demarcations of FPTP. The short term political focus has squeezed out any serious longer term planning based upon consensus and national interest. There can be no better example of this than the way in which political parties have

¹⁵ Bryant, Chris (2023) Code of Conduct - Why We Need To Fix Parliament and How To Do It. Bloomsbury: London

¹⁶ *ibid* p 45

¹⁷ Cabinet Office (2023) Annual Report on Special Advisers 2023 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64e36fba3309b700121c9bc1/2023-06-20_-_SpAd_Annual_Report_2023_v3.docx.pdf

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ [civilservant.org ‘Special Advisers History and Comment’ https://www.civilservant.org.uk/spads-history_and_comment.html](https://www.civilservant.org.uk/spads-history_and_comment.html)

failed to plan together, let alone agree, a solution to the problem of social care, despite a good level of agreement following the Dilnot Review 13 years ago.

Meanwhile, the stark result of the FPTP system allows politicians further solidify their positions by appointing more of their political cronies, friends and family members to the many positions of departmental non-executives (NEDs), or in national and public agencies and organisations - not forgetting the constant bestowing of peerages and honours for political patronage. Recommendations by the Institute of Government to limit ministerial involvement in public appointments remain to be implemented²⁰ and NED appointments are not regulated and open to political manipulation.²¹ As James O'Brien has pointed out in *How They Broke Britain*²², the extent of the inter-relationships, between MPs and these quasi political roles is very extensive and - apart from creating the obvious mutually reinforcing benefits - simply serve to reinforce the divisions within the political community.

This (mis)use of power extends to the appointment of contractors. Where we might have expected the procurement process to be handled by civil servants with a clear separation of non-executive and operational roles, MPs now seem to be ever closer to those bidding for Government contracts. The introduction of the 'VIP lane' to fast track and advantage friends and cronies in the purchase of PPE, lobbying on their behalf, or taking roles in their companies, during or immediately after their terms of office, serves to embed their monopolistic position. According to Transparency International, the UK has plunged to its lowest ever position (from 11th to 18th place) in the 'corruption perceptions index'²³.

The denigration of impartial and expert advisers means that it is now much more difficult to 'speak truth to power' and many opportunities to reform the civil service have been ignored. But partiality has become even more evident in the way that politicians now seek to ignore objective advice and criteria in order to bend public funding towards areas where they hope to retain or gain a seat in parliament. The £3.6bn Towns Fund allocations have proved to be particularly controversial with Ministers being accused of 'pork barrel politics'²⁴ and with many other criticisms of political manipulation. The commitment that MPs often give on their election night to serve all constituents and not just those that voted for them, is a principle that is now often observed in the breach.

But over the years the political class has sought to replicate the FPTP culture of 'strong government' through the institutional framework itself. The introduction of elected mayors and cabinet systems in local government, and the creation of the new police and crime commissioners (PCCs) have all been based upon the replacement of more open and collaborative processes with less accountable and more dominant party political individuals. These changes have been supported by both main parties, keen to get their hands on the

²⁰ Institute for Government <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/reforming-public-appointments>

²¹ Institute for Government <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/appointment-and-conduct-departmental-neds>

²² James O'Brien (2023) *How They Broke Britain*. W. H. Allen London

²³ Transparency International <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/gb>

²⁴ Hanretty, C. 'The Pork Barrel Politics of the Towns Fund' the Political Quarterly, Vol 92, Issue 1

levers of power without the inconvenience of having to work with others and build consensus and agreement - even when this was within their own political parties. Police Authorities were previously comprised of elected members of county and borough councils and one-third of magistrates. These actually worked well, generally building cross party consensus and taking on board other views. However, they were seen to be 'unaccountable', which is ironic as the new PCCs, are now subject to none of the checks and balances that the former authorities offered. The same is true of the position of elected mayor, which in some areas has replaced that of Council Leader²⁵ who was identifiable and accountable to both his or her party group and to all council members. And elected mayors for new combined authorities represent a new layer of government, not in any way accountable to other local representatives.

The introduction of cabinet style local government has also reduced accountability - and in a similar direction to that of PCCs and Elected Mayors has confused executive and non-executive roles. The use of the term 'cabinet', from central government is an indication of the intent to move local government further away from the collaborative style inherent in the committee system. Local councils in England do not have PR and can be dominated by one party, but the main feature of all of these new measures is to remove minority parties - and other viewpoints - from the decision making system.

Creating a culture of change

The 'us and them' culture of our political class would be understood in behavioural psychology as 'in-group v out-group'. This is an extremely well researched and documented concept, going back at least to 1954 when Allport's seminal work²⁶ was published. The process of creating an out-group threat has, according to many case studies, always been an alarmingly easy process, but over the years has become so much more easy to reinforce through modern media and communications. Jon Yates, himself a former SpAd provides a brilliant contemporary analysis²⁷, along with examples from the political realm, of how in-group and out-group fractures are both sustained and challenged.

FPTP, however, means that most of our politicians have no need - and no desire - to change. They also have none of the political skills necessary to develop a new collaborative style of politics. The adversarial culture of our political parties is so deeply embedded that if PR was introduced, it would take some time to unlearn the current patterns of behaviour and change political processes. It would be necessary to change other elements of the political system at the same time, including the reform the role of the whips, replacing the special adviser posts with an impartial support system, and changing parliamentary procedures to enable wider views and contributions to be taken into account.

However, the fundamental point about PR is that it creates a new and enduring political relationship, whether sought or imposed. Politicians would have to learn to live with it and

²⁵ the position of elected mayor includes both those replacing the Council Leader in existing authorities (eg the City of Leicester) and for new authorities such as the East Midlands combined authority.

²⁶ Allport G.W. (1954) *The Nature of Prejudice* Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley

²⁷ Yates Jon (2021) *Fractured - How We Learn to Live Together* . Manchester: Harper North

would be required to do so by what Axelrod²⁸ calls 'the shadow of the future'. Politicians would soon realise that a one-off agreements or a single joint programme would not be sufficient and that collaboration needed to be ongoing - in other words, co-operation becomes self-policing because reciprocity is required.

But even if they can learn to work together, it remains to be seen whether our existing politicians have the vision to develop the new range of policies that will bind us together and create a wider sense of common purpose. Or, indeed, whether they have the vision to deal with current challenges rather than continue to hark back to the class based politics of the past. A divisive political narrative has continued to succeed in gaining ground nationally and internationally. The populist tendency to offer simplistic and strident views, pitting 'us' against 'them' has to be addressed. Abandoning the FPTP system is the first step - though perhaps the most important - in modelling collaborative behaviour and creating a wider reset of our politics.

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²⁸ Axelrod, Robert (1984) *The Evolution of Co=operation* . New York: Basic Books