The Politics of Electoral Reform in Britain

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ABSTRACT. The debate about electoral reform in Britain has experienced periodic revivals, as critics have challenged the established system of first-past-the-post. The debate has revolved about how British elections translate votes into seats, and how representative elections should work: whether priority should be given to the principle of strong government or "fairness" to minor parties and social groups. The article concludes that despite a heated debate, prospects for reform are uncertain in Britain, since public opinion about this issue remains ambivalent; there are no provisions for binding referendums; and the opposition remains divided about the most appropriate alternative.

The debate about electoral reform in Britain has experienced successive waves, as critics have periodically sought to change the established system of first-past-the-post. The controversy has been re-energized in recent years with all opposition parties moving towards reform, although there is no consensus about the most appropriate new system. The heart of the debate revolves around how British elections translate votes into seats, and, even more fundamentally, how representative elections in Britain *should* work.

The most significant recent development in the reform movement has been Labour's hesitant and uncertain conversion to the cause. If there were a change of government at the next general election, the prospects for electoral reform look brighter than at any time since 1918. Under these circumstances a proportional system could be introduced for the proposed Scottish parliament, and perhaps for elections to local government and the European Parliament. Nevertheless, the prospect of abandoning first-past-the-post for the House of Commons seems far from certain, and divisions between and within the opposition parties could maintain the status quo.

The aim of this article is to understand the British debate for the light it sheds on the politics of electoral reform. The paper is divided into three sections. The first outlines the standards against which the British system is commonly evaluated. Defenders of the status quo prioritize the need for elections which produce strong

and responsive government while critics give greater weight to the criterion of
fairness to parties and social groups. The second section briefly summarizes the
evolution of the system from its historical roots and the major changes which have
been implemented. The third considers the politics of the first- and second-wave
reform movements, and the factors which have increased support for electoral
reform. These include long-term trends in party competition and short-term factors
like the position of party leaders. The conclusion considers the barriers to reform
and the prospects for change.

"Electoral reform" is a term which historically refers to a wide range of issues,
ranging from the expansion of voting rights to the redistribution of constituency
boundaries, and the elimination of electoral corruption. Interpreted broadly, there
are many questions which come within this field today, such as the regulation of
political broadcasting, reform of the House of Lords, the development of an
independent Electoral Commission, the facilities for registering and voting, and the
public funding of party campaigns. In recent years, however, the major British
debate has focused almost exclusively, as this article does, upon legal change to the
simple plurality system of translating votes into seats in elections for local govern-
ment, proposed regional assemblies, the House of Commons and the European
Parliament.

The Criteria for Evaluating the Westminster Model

The basic system of simple plurality voting in general elections is one widely famil-
iar: the United Kingdom is divided into 651 territorial single-member constituen-
cies;[1] voters within each constituency cast a single ballot (marked by an X) for one
candidate; the candidate with the largest share of the vote in each seat is returned
to Westminster; and the party with an overall majority of seats forms the govern-
ment. For admirers, this system produces the classic "Westminster model" with the
twin virtues of strong but responsive party government.

Strong in this sense means single-party government. Cohesive parties with a
majority of parliamentary seats are able to implement their manifesto policies
without the need to engage in post-election negotiations with coalition partners.
The election result is decisive for the outcome. Cabinet government can pass
whatever legislation they feel is necessary during their term of office, so long as
they can carry their own backbenchers with them. Strong government depends on
an exaggerative bias in the electoral system which rewards the winner with a bonus
of seats. A "manufactured majority" is created by translating a relatively small lead
in votes into a larger lead in parliament. In the postwar period British governments
have received, on average, 45 percent of the popular vote but 54 percent of the
seats. Even in a close election, where the Labour and Conservative vote was level-
pegging, one party could usually form a majority government independent of any
coalition partners.

Yet governments are also seen as *responsive*. At the end of their tenure of office
they remain accountable to the electorate, who can throw them out if they so wish.
In a competitive two-party system a small swing in the popular vote is sufficient to
bring the opposition into office. For proponents, the twin virtues mean power is
shackled with accountability. Governments are given enough rope to hang
themselves, and the electorate can form a clear judgement of their policy record.
At the local level the link between voters and their local member of parliament
(MP) is thought to provide citizens with a voice in the nation's affairs, as well as

making elected members accountable to constituency concerns. Responsive government depends upon the rate of potential seat turnover, and a delicate two-party equilibrium. If substantial numbers of government backbenchers have majorities of, say, under 10 percent over their nearest rival, a relatively modest swing of the vote could easily bring the opposition into power. Although governments have a parliamentary majority to take tough and effective decisions, they know that their power could easily be withdrawn at the next election.

The virtues of the Westminster system have been seen to override other considerations, advanced by critics, such as the fairness of the outcome for minor parties, the need for Madisonian checks to party government, or the representation of social groups. The debate about electoral reform has largely revolved around the practical consequences of incremental changes to the status quo. But underlying these arguments are contested visions about the fundamental principles of representative democracy.

For advocates of the Westminster model, responsible party government takes precedence over the inclusion of all parties in strict proportion to their share of the vote. The primary purpose of general elections is for Westminster to function as an indirect electoral college which produces an effective, stable government. The way that the system penalizes minor parties can be seen by proponents as a virtue. It prevents fringe groups like the National Front or the British National Party from acquiring representative legitimacy, thereby avoiding a fragmented Parliament full of "fads and faddists."

For critics, the moral case for reform is based traditionally on the "unfairness" to minor parties which achieve a significant share of the vote, like the Liberal Democrats, but which win few seats because their support is thinly spread geographically. In recent years other features of the system have also generated pressures for reform. The development of the "north–south" divide since the mid-1950s, and the revival of nationalism in Scotland, led to increased support for an independent Scottish parliament. This opened the door to rethinking the most appropriate electoral system for such a body, without the inbuilt conservatism created by the vested interests of incumbents. Demands for change were also generated by increasing concern about the social composition of parliament.

Only 60 women (9.2 percent) were elected to the House of Commons in the 1992 election, which meant that Britain lagged far behind most European countries, and one reason for this is single-member constituencies (Norris, 1985). The Scottish Convention, concerned about this issue, has considered various alternatives including legally binding gender quotas, dual-member constituencies designated by gender, and an additional membership system (AMS) with party lists. The debate about electoral reform in Britain has produced conflict about means (what would be the effects on party fortunes of the single transferable vote (STV) or the alternative vote (AV)) but even more fundamentally about ends (what is the primary objective of the electoral system?). As Iain McLean argues, "The proportional representation (PR) school looks at the composition of a parliament; majoritarians look at its decisions" (McLean, 1991).

Evolution of the System

One reason why majoritarian elections continue is the weight of tradition. The Westminster model has an ancient historical lineage. Since the development of the

medieval Parliament in 1264, Britain has used territorial constituencies with simple plurality elections for the House of Commons. After 1430 all county freeholders[2] who fulfilled the property requirements were entitled to vote for the two representatives each county sent to the Commons to deliberate on revenues and taxation (Butt, 1989; Seymour, 1915). The system of MPs representing territorial communities (not parties or groups or individuals) gained constitutional legitimacy through the weight of tradition. In Britain simple plurality elections, with different constituency boundaries, are used for the House of Commons, local government and European parliamentary elections. The main exceptions have been in Northern Ireland[3] and in some local elections.[4]

Variants of the Westminster system were exported from Britain to the United States, Canada, Australia, India, and, until 1993 they were present in South Africa and New Zealand, and they are common in many countries outside of Europe (see Bogdanor and Butler, 1983). Reeve and Ware suggest the British system is exceptional (Reeve and Ware, 1992), but a recent world-wide comparison of parliaments found that just over half (83 out of 150 countries) used majoritarian elections (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1993).

The British electoral system has evolved through a continuous series of amendments. The most significant have widened the franchise, abolished dual-member constituencies, removed corrupt practices, and standardized electoral administration. Suffrage was extended in successive Reform Acts to the middle and working classes (1832, 1967, 1884), to women (1918, 1928), and to younger voters (1969). Single-member constituencies were introduced in 1707, became standard practice after 1885, and the last remaining dual-member seats were abolished in 1948. Bribery was effectively eliminated through the introduction of the Secret Ballot (1872) and the Corrupt Practices Act (1883). The principle of constituencies of roughly equal population size was accepted and electoral administration was standardized (1918); regular boundary reviews were introduced following the creation of the permanent Boundary Commission in 1944; and after the Second World War certain anomalies such as plural voting and university seats (1948) were eliminated. Since 1950 Britain has had single-member seats roughly equal in population size, although Wales and Scotland have been systematically overrepresented. Changes to simple plurality elections have added incremental layers to its medieval origins, as Butler notes:

> Electoral habits have been altered gradually, and the party system has been transformed, but there has never been a sudden break in practice, and many traditions have survived, in some form or other, from pre-reform days. . .. It may be said that much of the vocabulary, some of the formalities, and a few of the institutions are still those which prevailed in the eighteenth century (Butler, 1963).

Plurality elections therefore predate the development of parties, and modern notions of representative democracy. This is one reason why the system persisted at the turn of the century, when other European countries were moving towards proportional representation, because plurality elections were such a well-established part of the British constitution. The system buttressed the Westminster model of strong Cabinet government (with individual and collective responsibility), a unitary state, and parliamentary sovereignty. Like an intricate and delicately balanced mechanism, if one part were changed, the rest might fall apart.

The Politics of the Reform Movement

The reform movement in Britain has experienced periods of resurgence, when constitutional change has risen on the mainstream political agenda. The "first-wave" movement became most active in the periods prior to the Reform Acts of 1867, 1884, and 1918, which saw a gradual consolidation and standardization of the simple plurality system. The last gasp of the first-wave movement came in 1931, but it subsequently died with the re-emergence of the two-party system (see Butler, 1963; Hart, 1992; Bogdanor, 1981). The "second-wave" movement became active from 1974 onwards, when a wide range of critics challenged the status quo.

Most of the British debate has certain characteristics. Discussion among politicians has tended to be largely pragmatic, concerning the possible effects of certain incremental changes on party fortunes, rather than the broader principles of representative democracy. The discussion has occasionally considered wider theoretical issues, such as the 1991 Plant report, but this has tended to be exceptional. Debate has been conducted within certain parameters. Attention has focused on the relative virtues of the alternative vote used in the Australian House of Representatives (and its variant, the supplementary vote), the single transferable vote used in Ireland, or the more radical proposal of a mixed additional (or mixed) member system used in Germany. Regional or national party list systems, common throughout Europe, have never formed part of the mainstream reform agenda in Britain.

Lastly the movement has been largely elite-driven; support for reform during the first-wave movement was limited to a small group of enthusiasts and the issue never captured the popular imagination. The second-wave debate about constitutional change has been more wide-ranging, especially in Scotland. Groups like Charter '88 have excited the chattering classes and the broadsheet editorial pages. The issue was widely publicized in media coverage during the last weeks of the 1992 election campaign (Allsop, 1992). Nevertheless, compared with bread-and-butter-issues, electoral reform has never been a highly salient issue on the public's agenda. Survey data, which need interpreting with particular care given the high proportion of undecideds, suggest, according to Stuart Weir, that a majority of the public is broadly sympathetic to many questions of reform (Weir, 1992). Nevertheless, Peter Kellner considers this response to be shallow and inconsistent, depending upon the party-cues given during the campaign, and the sort of questions which are asked, rather than reflecting well-defined and stable attitudes (Kellner, 1992).

The First-wave Reform Debate

The roots of the modern debate can be traced to the 1860s, when pressures mounted for another Reform Bill extending the franchise to the mass of the working class. This prospect produced a variety of schemes from those who feared minority rights of the better-educated professional middle classes would be "swamped" by the rising tide of mass democracy. These included James Garth Marshall's proposal for a cumulative vote, which was defeated in debates on the 1867 Reform Act. The cumulative vote would have given electors in multi-member constituencies as many votes as representatives for that seat, and all could be cast for one candidate. So a small minority who all "plumped" for the same candidate would win against a diffuse majority. To achieve the same aims, Lord Cairns' amendment, included in the Reform Act, introduced a limited vote in fourteen constituencies with more than two members.

The adoption of a single transferable vote system, the "Anglo-Saxon" version of proportional representation, was considered in the run-up to the Second Reform Act. John Stuart Mill helped lead the parliamentary amendment in favour of Hare's scheme, which had been published a few years earlier. In its original version, Hare proposed the whole country would form one nationwide constituency, electors could write in the names of as many candidates as they wished, voting would be preferential, and MPs would be elected if they reached a set quota produced by dividing the total number of votes cast by the total number of seats. This proposal found hardly any backers, indeed most thought it would produce a parliament full of "cranks and faddists," and this reputation persisted for many years. After the Second Reform Act, Hare modified his scheme to use smaller multi-member constituencies, which lives on in the modern form exemplified today in Ireland and Malta.

Proportional representation was again considered during passage of the 1884 Reform Act, but it found little support. The party leaders consolidated the majoritarian characteristics of the system by establishing single-member seats for all but 27 constituencies, and abolishing the few seats with a limited vote. Conservative leaders came to support single-member plurality elections because they believed, with good reason, that they could compete successfully in them. The Radical Liberals wanted to strengthen party discipline; Chamberlain believed that the attempt to preserve minority representation tended to divide the party into rival factions, and thereby prevent collective action.

The issue resurfaced when constitutional issues rose on the agenda before the First World War, leading to the cross-party Speaker's Conference of 1916–17. Although little is known about its deliberations, this body produced a series of radical recommendations, including the introduction of votes for women over a specified age, proportional representation in borough constituencies, and the alternative vote in all others. There were a number of reasons why proportional representation acquired support; the wartime coalition had promoted party fluidity; the rise of the Labour Party created the conditions for multi-party politics; and it came at a time when other democracies like Belgium, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, Austria, Italy, and Germany had moved, or were moving towards, proportional systems. But the proposal was defeated in a succession of free votes in parliament on the 1917–18 Reform Bill, due largely to opposition from the Conservatives, Liberals and Labour leaders, with the parties divided on the issue. The Liberal leadership later regretted this decision, adopting proportional representation as official party policy in 1922, but by then it was too late for them to implement this proposal, given their drastically reduced party fortunes. Some Labour intellectuals advocated constitutional change, but these were always minority concerns. From the 1920s Labour were as committed to the established system as the Conservatives. A less radical reform of the voting system, the alternative vote, was approved in 1931 by the House of Commons during the second Labour government, under pressure from the Liberals, but this measure was defeated in the Lords, and a change of government prevented it from being adopted (see Butler, 1963; Bogdanor, 1981; Hart, 1992).

During the 1950s and 1960s the issue was quiescent. These decades saw the apotheosis of the modern two-party system, with textbooks extolling the virtues of the British constitution as a model of stable, responsible party government which others might do well to emulate. This was demonstrated by the 1965–67 Speaker's Conference on Electoral Law, which overwhelmingly voted to retain the status quo.

The nadir of Liberal and Nationalist Party support meant that there were few legitimate grounds for complaint about their share of seats. For the major parties the system seemed to work by producing the regular swing of the pendulum between Labour and Conservative administrations. Constitutional questions came well below the issues of economic and technological growth, Britain's search for a new international role with the decline of empire, and the consolidation of the welfare state. The main governmental reforms of the 1960s were designed to make the system work more efficiently, to streamline the legislative process, and to rationalize the administrative machine.

The Second-Wave Reform Debate

The controversy acquired new urgency in the early 1970s, when the problems of fairness and effective majoritarian government were sharply highlighted by long-term changes in party competition. The February 1974 general election produced a short-lived hung Parliament. A minority Labour government was returned with the largest number of parliamentary seats (301 to 297) although coming second to the Conservatives in their share of the vote (37.2 to 37.9). All the minor parties, consolidating developments in by-elections since the late 1960s, expanded their support. The Liberals more than doubled their electoral fortunes, with 19.3 percent of the vote, yet gained only 2 percent of the seats (14 MPs) (see Table 1). Plaid

TABLE 1. *Votes : Seats Ratio 1945–1992.*

	Government			Opposition				Liberals			
	Votes %	Seats %	Diff %	Ratio %	Votes %	Seats %	Diff %	Ratio %	Votes %	Seats %	Diff %
1945	48	61	13.4	1.28	40	33	−6.8	.83	9	2	−7.1
1950	46	50	4.3	1.09	43	48	4.3	1.10	9	1	−7.7
1951	48	51	3.3	1.07	49	47	−1.6	.97	3	1	−1.6
1955	50	55	5.1	1.10	46	44	−2.4	.95	3	1	−1.8
1959	49	58	8.5	1.17	44	41	−2.8	.94	6	1	−5.0
1964	44	50	6.2	1.14	43	48	4.9	1.11	11	1	−9.8
1966	48	58	9.8	1.20	42	40	−1.8	.96	9	2	−6.7
1970	46	52	5.9	1.13	43	46	2.6	1.06	8	1	−6.5
1974	37	47	10.2	1.27	38	47	8.9	1.23	19	2	−17.1
1974	39	50	11.0	1.28	36	44	7.8	1.22	18	2	−16.2
1979	44	53	9.5	1.22	37	42	5.5	1.15	14	2	−12.1
1983	42	61	18.7	1.44	28	32	4.6	1.17	25	4	−21.9
1987	42	58	15.6	1.37	31	35	4.4	1.14	23	3	−19.1
1992	42	52	9.8	1.23	34	42	7.4	1.22	18	3	−14.8
Mean 45–70	47	54	6.2	1.15	44	45	.5	.99	7	1	−5.6
Mean 74–92	41	54	12.5	1.30	34	40	6.4	1.19	20	3	−16.9
Mean 45–92	45	54	9.1	1.21	40	43	3.2	1.07	13	2	−10.8

Cymru elected two MPs while the Scottish National Party expanded from one to seven MPs. In Northern Ireland, following the growth of the troubles and withdrawal of the major parties, four minor parties were returned from the province.

From 1970 to February 1974 the two-party share of the votes plummeted from 90 to 75 percent, although Labour and the Conservative parties continued to sweep up 94 percent of the seats. These results opened the British system to the charge of transparent unfairness to the minor parties, especially if, like the Liberals, their vote was not spatially concentrated. In the 1950s, the virtual obliteration of minor parties raised little public concern. In recent years changes in party competition have raised serious questions of democratic legitimacy; successive Conservative administrations have held power since 1979 with the support of no more than one-third of the total electorate.

Trends over time in the exaggerative bias of the electoral system can be estimated by calculating a simple "seats–votes" ratio. This ratio is produced by dividing each party's percentage of UK votes by the same party's percentage of UK seats (see Norris and Crewe, 1994), a measure which is intuitively easy to understand, simple to estimate, and can be calculated for any UK party. The results (see Table 1) indicate that in the post-war period the exaggerative qualities of the British electoral system have been influenced by two main developments. First, since 1970 the centre parties have been increasingly penalized by the system; they have disproportionately decreased their share of seats in relation to their share of votes. In 1955 it took 120 400 votes to elect each Liberal Member of Parliament, whereas in 1992 it took 304 183 votes. As a result the exaggerative bias of the seats–votes ratio for both main parties has increased. During the two periods under comparison the seats–votes ratio for the government increased from 1.5 to 1.30, and for the opposition from 0.99 to 1.19. To put it another way, in 1955 it took 38 582 votes to elect each Conservative MP, whereas in 1983 it took just 32 776, despite the fact that meanwhile the number of electors had increased by a fifth. The effect has been the government advantage over all parties has increased over time, which helps to explain how ample Conservative majorities in the 1980s have accompanied historically low shares of the national vote.[5]

The second reason why the exaggerative bias of the electoral system has changed is the growing disparity in the size of constituencies. The Labour Party has benefited more from this change than the Conservative Party; hence the rise in the opposition's seats–votes ratio since 1974. When revising constituencies, the boundary commissions apply an electoral quota produced by dividing the total electorate by the number of constituencies at the time the review begins. The commissioners work to produce constituencies with an electorate close to the quota, although this is not always practical. Until 1965 the quota was calculated for Britain as a whole but since then it has been related to each part of the UK; in 1983 the quota was 66 000 for England but 59 000 for Wales, 54 000 for Scotland, and 61 000 for Northern Ireland.

These regional quotas have benefited the Labour Party, given its strength in the urban areas of central Scotland and in south Wales. Patterns of internal population migration, with the gradual depopulation of depressed inner cities with a solid Labour vote, like Liverpool, Newcastle and Sunderland, have also disadvantaged the Conservatives especially when the boundaries were seriously out of date. There is a significant delay between publication of the census data and the implementation of work of the commission, which means that, given the population trends, even the

new boundaries fail to produce an equal number of electors in each constituency. In 1955 there were about 55 000 electors in the average British seat, with the number in Conservative and Labour seats roughly equal (indeed Labour had slightly more, 700+). By 1970, before the next major boundary revisions came into effect, the number of electors in Labour seats had gradually risen to 57 000, but in Conservative seats the number had shot up to 67 000. In 1992 the disparity had grown again, so that Conservative seats contained 71 000 electors compared with 61 600 in Labour constituencies, 58 800 in Liberal Democrat seats, and 55 700 in Nationalist seats.

The system's bias against centre parties, combined with the disparity in the size of Conservative and Labour seats, has served to close the opposition–government seats–votes ratio. The winner's bonus for the government has increased. Once we take all parties into account, we find the exaggerative bias of the British electoral system has strengthened over time.

These trends since the early 1970s caused increased concern about the fairness of the system for minor parties. In 1975 Samuel Finer published an influential set of essays criticizing the British system (Finer, 1975). The following year Lord Blake produced a report for the Hansard Society, recommending that Britain adopt the additional member system used in Germany (Blake, 1976). For the Conservatives, Lord Hailsham expressed concern that Britain was moving towards an "elected dictatorship," with insufficient constitutional checks on government (Hailsham, 1976), the group Conservative Action for Electoral Reform (proposing STV) was established in 1974, and the Conservative Party seriously considered electoral reform at its 1975 conference. Conservative debate died down following Mrs. Thatcher's substantial majority in the 1979 election, although the subsequent growth of support for the Liberal–Social Democratic Party Alliance, and the continued weakness of the Labour Party, kept the issue on the agenda for the chattering classes.

The 1983 election further fuelled debate about the unfairness of the bias for spatially-spread centre parties; only 23 Liberal–SDP Alliance MPs were elected despite gaining 25.4 percent of the vote. In contrast 209 Labour MPs were returned for 27.6 percent of the vote. This dramatized the extent of the political problem for centre parties. While unfair in the proportion of votes–seats for minor parties, unless Labour could be persuaded to support electoral reform, and there was a Labour government, or a hung parliament with Labour as the largest party, there could be no change to the status quo.

The last wave in this debate gathered momentum in the last decade fuelled by concern over the imbalance of the two-party system with the return of successive Conservative administrations after 1979; continued dissatisfaction with the fairness of first-past-the-post for the centre parties; external pressures such as the March 1993 EU resolution to adopt a uniform system for elections to the European Parliament; the Scottish Constitutional Convention which started in March 1989; the rediscovery of the issue of "citizenship" and constitutional reform by the soft left, exemplified by Charter '88; pressure from the women's movement to boost the number of women MPs; and last, but by no means least, Labour's hesitant, lukewarm and mixed conversion to the cause of electoral reform. This change in the Labour Party has been within the context of a wider questioning of constitutional conventions (see Marquand, 1992). Following their years in the electoral wilderness under four successive Conservative administrations, the Labour Party has moved tentatively towards electoral reform as official policy, although they

remain divided, and there remains considerable disagreement among the opposition parties about the most appropriate alternative to first-past-the-post.

Pressures for constitutional reform had built up within the party. After their 1987 defeat Labour instigated a wide-ranging policy review which reversed Labour's traditional commitment to many policies seen as vote-losers, like unilateral nuclear disarmament and public ownership of industry (Smith and Spear, 1992). The leadership, notably Roy Hattersley, wished to exclude electoral reform as part of this agenda, believing that with "one more heave" a majoritarian Labour government could be returned to power on its own, without reliance upon coalition partners. But modernizers, like the MP Robin Cook, gained momentum within the party, fuelled by developments in the Scottish Convention. The Labour Coordinating Committee and the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform argued for change. In September 1990 a close vote at the Labour conference carried a motion, against the platform, calling for an inquiry into the electoral system. In response the National Executive established a working party chaired by Professor (now Lord) Raymond Plant. The first Plant report in July 1991 made no concrete recommendations but provided a detailed, balanced and thorough analysis of the pros and cons of the principles behind alternative systems (Labour Party, 1992b).

After the second Plant report in 1992 the National Executive accepted the proposal for an additional member system (AMS) for a Scottish parliament. This proposal had been prompted by the Scottish Constitutional Convention, which argued that this system would retain the existing constituency boundaries, and keep the link between elected members and their local electors, yet it would help secure equal representation for women and men, and produce a proportional result to help minor party representation (Labour Party, 1992a). But for Westminster, Labour decided not to decide. Instead, the 1992 manifesto only proposed to strengthen the Plant committee with "an extended membership and enhanced authority" to encourage "a wide and well-informed public debate on the electoral system" (Labour Party Manifesto, 1992). As a result the Labour Party went into the 1992 general election without a clear policy on this issue, the classic Labour Party fudge. This prevarication rebounded in the last week of the campaign when it appeared that a hung parliament might be likely, and Neil Kinnock, the Labour leader, was unable to clarify his views on this issue when repeatedly asked to do so by the press (Allsop, 1992).

After twenty-eight meetings the Plant Commission published its third report with final recommendations in April 1993. For many observers, despite the thoroughness of its deliberations, the end result was a disappointing, half-baked compromise. After a series of complex votes, the working group eventually voted narrowly (nine votes to seven) in favour of the adoption of the majoritarian supplementary vote (SV) for the Commons, defeating those who preferred the more proportional additional member system (*The Guardian*, 2 April 1993, p. 8). The supplementary vote, proposed by MP Dale Campbell-Savours, is an idiosyncratic variant of the alternative vote. Under this system, which has never been used elsewhere, voters within existing single-member constituencies would mark their ballot with their first and second preferences. A candidate would need to gain over 50 percent of the first ballot to win. If none had this, candidates placed third or lower would be eliminated, and the second preferences would be redistributed to the top two. The system is therefore only a minor modification of first-past-the-post, as Plant noted, the change would be "practical, straightforward, comparatively modest" (Labour Party, 1993). It would reinforce the majoritarian bias within the electoral system, would

not help increase the representation of women or ethnic minorities, and would make only a modest difference to the minor party share of seats. SV is designed to preserve the link between MPs and their constituencies, while encouraging tactical voting to the benefit, Campbell-Savours argues, of the anti-Conservative parties (Campbell-Savours, 1993). The most rigorous estimate of the possible effect of the supplementary vote, by Dunleavy et al., suggests that this system would have produced only a modest, though perhaps significant, difference to the results of the 1992 general election in terms of seats won and lost. The main effect on party fortunes, the study suggests, would be a net shift of about 10 or 11 seats from the Conservatives to Liberal Democrats, with Labour remaining unchanged (Dunleavy et al., 1992a, 1992b).

The recommendations of the Plant committee was showered with flak from all sides (for a range of critiques see *Representation*, 1993). For modernizers, SV represents a "half-baked compromise," "the worst option," which would mainly help the Liberals (Mitchell, 1993). For traditionalists, any reform would lose Labour seats in the south, and open the way for "extremism, the British National Party, racism and fascism and lunatic minorities" (White and Wintour, 1993). For defenders of first-past-the-post, the Plant committee lacked faith in Labour's eventual recovery: "A massive amount of time and energy has been thrown away considering PR by Labour fainthearts who no longer believe the party can win an overall majority under the present system" (Sherman, 1993).

The parliamentary Labour Party was divided; 60 MPs backed the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform (backing the additional member system), 86 MPs supported Labour's First-Past-The-Post Campaign, and the remaining 125 were undeclared (Davies and Clement, 1993). In May 1993 the Labour leader, John Smith, decided that, if elected to government, Labour should put the issue before the public in a consultative referendum, although he personally continued to favour first-past-the-post for Westminster, and he rejected the recommendations of the Plant report (White and Wintour, 1993). The referendum pledge kept the door open for reformers, like the Labour Coordinating Committee, but avoided damaging internal divisions which may have been produced by adopting a clear-cut policy for or against Westminster reform. In the end this compromise aroused little debate, overshadowed by the controversy about union reform, and it became official party policy at the September 1993 Labour conference. A conference motion opposing the referendum (Composite 34) was defeated by a fairly close vote (46 to 40 percent). At the same time a resolution (Composite 33), opposed by the leadership, urging the party to "uphold the first-past-the-post system for the House of Commons elections—a tried and tested system which delivers strong, single-party government" was passed decisively (45 to 35 percent). The feeling of most grassroots activists at the conference was probably best articulated by one delegate: "Any talk of changing the electoral system is at best premature, and at worst a waste of time. PR will not be an issue at the next election. We know it will be jobs, housing, education, health and social services" (*The Guardian*, 1 October 1993). Although disappointing for many modernizers, the pledge to adopt a more proportional system for the Scottish parliament, for an elected second chamber and for the European Parliament, plus the referendum for the House of Commons (Composite Motion 31 carried by 45 to 42 percent) did not totally close the door on reform. This may be seen as one step, but an important one, along the road to long-term constitutional change (Georghiou, 1993).

Conclusions: Prospects for Reform

We can conclude that after much internal debate about the best system for Westminster, Labour remains divided between modernizers who favour the additional (or mixed) member system (AMS), compromisers who prefer the supplementary vote (SV), and traditionalists who want to retain first-past-the-post for the Commons. Official Labour policy proposes the additional member system for a Scottish assembly, fixed-term parliaments for Westminster, and a new elected second chamber to replace the House of Lords. Following the New Zealand precedent, Labour have pledged to hold a referendum on reform should they be returned to power. In contrast, the Liberal Democrats continue to advocate the single transferable vote (STV) for Westminster. The Scottish National Party favours a combination of the alternative vote (for two-thirds of the seats) and the additional member system (for the remainder) for a Scottish parliament. Finally the Conservatives remain staunch defenders of first-past-the-post for elections at every level.

In Britain, unlike as in Italy, New Zealand, Israel and Japan, the reform movement to date has failed to produce substantive change. The primary reasons, it can be argued, are threefold: the movement in favour of electoral reform has been primarily elite-driven, and the public mood remains uncertain and generally indifferent (Kellner, 1992); even if public opinion became aroused to the urgent need for change, there are no constitutional provisions for the sort of binding referendums which are open to citizens in Italy and New Zealand; finally, the Labour Party remains at best deeply divided on the issue while the governing Conservative Party remains implacably opposed. A Labour government after the next election could produce a referendum on the issue. But it is not clear that the reformers would necessarily win. As David Butler notes, the advocates of change must unite on one alternative if they are to have much chance of success (Butler, 1993). Meanwhile, for any prospect of reform the Conservatives need to be defeated under the traditional system, and the debate among opposition parties will continue.

Notes

1. There were 651 UK constituencies in the 1992 general election although this figure may change following the current boundary review.
2. Note that the borough also used similar dual constituencies although the franchise was not standardized.
3. In Northern Ireland Single Transferable Vote elections were used for the Stormont Parliament in the 1920s, the Convention in the 1970s, the Assembly in 1973 and 1982, and STV continues to be used for local government and the European parliamentary elections. In addition before abolition four university seats used STV between 1918 and 1945.
4. The plurality system normally works through single-member constituencies but some London borough and district council elections have multi-member wards using a highly disproportional "block vote" system (see Bogdanor and Butler, 1983).
5. It should be noted that, as argued elsewhere, the seats–votes ratio for all parties is the most appropriate measure to estimate electoral bias, since the government requires a working majority of seats in Parliament over all other parties, not just over the main party of opposition. In this way it is preferable to the "cube rule" or alternative indicators based on the two-party vote.

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