

DT007 - The defects of proportional representation (PR)

I was pleased to see the item by Jon Hibbs (25 September 1989) reporting that party chiefs are losing the battle to prevent Conservative constituency parties being set up in Northern Ireland. A grave mistake was made when it was decided, on first establishing the province in the 1920s, that it should not be treated like any other part of the United Kingdom. The surest way to defeat the IRA is for us to assert that in future it will be so treated. What we now need is a firm declaration by the Government that, as is the wish of a majority of its people, Northern Ireland is no less a part of the United Kingdom than Devon or Midlothian. This should be constantly repeated, until it finally sinks in. Only then will the IRA admit defeat and give up their 'armed struggle'.

This is not the only misjudgment currently being made about our political system. Why do not government spokesmen speak out boldly against the fashionable fad of proportional representation (PR)? The first thing that needs pointing out is that there are many PR systems and the arguments, though all bad, are different for each. The main distinction is between multi-seat and single-seat constituencies. The former have many disadvantages, as the Irish Republic has discovered. One is that instead of his or her own MP, serving a small area, the elector has say half a dozen MPs, serving a large area. The personal connection is lost, since no one MP admits to serving any one group of electors. The constituent may have many miles to travel to attend an MP's surgery. An MP on the other hand is plagued by groups and individuals from throughout the multi-seat area.

The former Irish minister Gemma Hussey has just taken early retirement from politics, announcing her disillusionment with the 'straitjacket' into which MPs are forced by the multi-seat system. The Fine Gael election manifesto of 1987 expressed concern 'at the extent to which pressures deriving from our present multi-seat electoral system divert [MPs] away from their legislative role towards an undue concentration on constituency work'. The single-seat PR system is better, but still open to criticism. By means of the single transferable vote it usually ensures the election of a candidate who is the first or *second* preference of a majority of voters. Gemma Hussey prefers this system to what she calls the 'grossly unfair' British system under which, she objects, a great many MPs represent a minority of their constituents. As a constitutional lawyer, I want to suggest the contrary. If in a constituency no candidate is in fact preferred by a majority of the voters then it is *not* unfair to declare the one with most votes elected. There is simply no valid alternative. It is not a valid alternative to transfer an elector's vote to the candidate who is his *second* preference. That does not produce an MP who represents a majority, because many within that 'majority' truly preferred a different candidate.

The impression has gathered strength that the British electoral system is in some way improper. Even people outside Britain believe this, particularly where (as in India) they have inherited our system. I believe that on the contrary it is the only fair and accurate electoral system possible. We must go back to seeing an MP as the representative of a small group of around 50,000 voters known as a constituency. The candidate declared elected is the one who got more votes than any other candidate in the constituency, and it is not possible to get fairer than that. The figures you obtain when you add up all the votes for all the candidates in all the constituencies are interesting but irrelevant. Constituency representation is the name of the game, and we mustn't let the minority parties delude us into a guilty feeling the system that achieves this is in some way unfair to them. It isn't.