

The following letter was written in response to a letter from John Death (see 1999.003.NFB) criticising FB's earlier articles in the New Law Journal (see 1999.010) on Proportional Representation.

Francis Bennion replies

PR enthusiasts are so very touchy when anyone dares question their faith. For a person to defend First Past The Post (FPTP) is akin to blasphemy. I await being burnt at the stake when the new Third Age comes in. Meanwhile let me point out that on PR Paddy Ashdown has adopted the Goebbels philosophy: repeat a big lie often enough and the masses will believe it. I lived through Goebbels, and can easily see through that. My present aim is to shoot down the Ashdown big lie. Why do I bother? Because it matters to all of us.

Ashdown's big lie is that FPTP is "unfair". Mr Death calls it a "wretched system" and says PR gives "fairer representation". That is refuted at length by the careful arguments set out in my first article at page 636 above, which Mr Death does not seriously attempt to address. I will very briefly summarise them.

To say that it is "unfair" for a party to be able form a government on a minority of the votes cast involves a basic misunderstanding of the electoral process. If say three different and mutually inconsistent manifestos are submitted for decision by vote it is unlikely that there will be an overall majority for any one of them. This is neither "fair" nor "unfair": it is the result purely of arithmetic. The remedy is that electors of all parties are deemed to be represented by the MP they actually get in the election. The constitutional doctrine is that MPs must treat all their constituents equally, and MPs observe it.

The real question is not one of "fairness" but political wisdom. In the light of the facts of voting arithmetic, is it wiser to have (a) a system which recognises the likelihood that the electorate will be presented with three or more inconsistent manifestos, and accepts that there is nothing better available than to recognise the integrity of each manifesto and adopt in its entirety the one which gets most votes in a majority of constituencies (resulting in a stable one-party government), or (b) a system that in such circumstances leads to two or more of the manifestos being broken down and partly amalgamated in deals carried out *after* the election (resulting in an unforeseeable and probably unstable coalition)? It seems to me obvious that the first alternative is democratic and the second is not.