

# Letters to the Editor

## The Case Against P.R.

Anthony King's publications are always informative, and this applies in particular to his succinct account of the rise of the SDP ("Whatever Is Happening to the British Party System?"). May I, however, comment on a couple of points?

First, his reference to "Party System" means what is commonly termed the "two-party system." England has, as Professor King makes clear, always had more than two parties. The essence of the two-party system consists in the fact that, ordinarily, one of the two leaders secures an overall majority in the House of Commons. Elections are held on a Thursday and by Friday afternoon either the incumbent prime minister knows that he stays in office, or if he is defeated he submits his resignation to the Queen. He is then followed within an hour by the leader of his former position, who will have a functioning cabinet in place by Monday. The two-party system is, therefore, a system of democratic and efficient alternating one-party-majority governments.

There is, of course, no "safety net" for either of the major parties. Challenges to one, or both of them, are always possible but, if successful, a new group, such as Labour in the 1920s, takes the place of one of the older ones. There may be a period of transition during which it can happen that a government is based on a mere plurality in the House. That does not last. Eventually there will be again an alternation of one-party-majority governments. The system, therefore, represents a stable equilibrium which restores itself: The "realignment" of the parties *within* the system has left the system itself intact.

This will also happen in the case of the

Social Democratic Party (SDP), but on the condition that the plurality system of voting is retained. However, the first plank in the SDP-Liberal Alliance is an agreement to institute some version of proportional representation (P.R.). Professor King very properly uses quotation marks when he refers to the plurality system as "the first past the post" system. That deprecatory designation for the plurality system originated with what, for generations, called itself "The Proportional Representation Society" but, in this age of public relations, changed its name to "Electoral Reform Society."

A good hundred years ago Walter Bagehot, dealing with Thomas Hare's single transferable vote system of P.R., insisted that the difference between the existing and the proposed systems was "fundamental" (*The English Constitution*, World's Classics edition, p. 132). He concluded that P.R. was "inconsistent" with the basic requirements of parliamentary government. The Royal Commission on Systems of Elections, reporting in 1910, arguing more narrowly, still concluded that, if P.R. were adopted: "What arrangements might ultimately have to be made to induce any party to undertake the administration of the country in such circumstances....it is impossible to foresee: it is only clear that parliamentary government as now understood in England would become impossible" (p. 29).

## Results of P.R.

Since Bagehot wrote and the Royal Commission reported, much water has passed under London Bridge. A variety of modified P.R. systems has been used; the results differ from country to country and from time to time. Still, some of the essentials remain:

First, there is no P.R. system which is compatible with the British two-party system as defined above. Even under the plurality system recent margins of victory have been so narrow that any of the P.R. systems now proposed in England would wash them away.

Second, references to the German experience miss the point. What has made Germany's P.R. performance superior to that of most other countries is the fact that, due in part to the five percent clause, there has existed for some time, and will exist until further notice, a "two and a half party system." At the right of center the Christian Democrats are clearly in the lead, and at the left of center the Social Democrats. The Free Democrats, standing between them, act as the swing party, and have in recent years indicated before the elections which major party they would support afterwards. Thus, people knew for what type of government, and for which chancellor, they voted, though negotiations for forming a cabinet have, on occasion, been difficult. The wish of the coalition partners to establish their own profile (*Profilneurose*) has caused, and is causing right now, many an anxious moment.

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English experience will not follow the German model. Under P.R. there would be, to begin with, the Conservatives, the Alliance of Liberals and SDP, and Labour. Belgian experience after World War I demonstrates that even if only two parties are needed to form a coalition the resulting difficulties may be great. Then, any form of P.R. will make it less necessary for the Liberals and the SDP to stick together than does the plurality system. The desire of so many "militants" in the ranks of both to "go it alone" will be hard to repress if the single-transferable vote (the Hare system) is adopted. It will be dampened if, as proposed by a commission appointed by the Hansard Society, 480 single-member constituencies are sup-

plemented by only 160 supplementary seats, to be distributed in regional districts to establish proportionality, and limited to parties securing more than five percent of the vote. Even then the tendency to strengthen the major parties, so strong under the plurality system, will be sharply reduced, and the need for coalition partners increased. Regional parties, including the various nationalists, will see their chances improved, as will the Communists at the left and the National Front at the right.

Whenever the political system begins to function with the kind of difficulties which it has exhibited in other P.R. countries, there will be fresh wind in the sails of the extremists. The mere possibility of losing votes to such competitors creates a new political atmosphere. Thus in the spring of 1930 the German Social Democrats let the government of Herrmann Mueller, led by their own leader, fail over a very minor issue, largely because they were afraid of losing added votes to the Communists—which they later did anyway.

### **Zero Sum Society**

Third, all P.R. countries will be more vulnerable to the effects of P.R. in the apparently impending "zero sum society" than they have been during the period of unprecedented prosperity which followed World War II. Denmark with its Glistrup party was the first one to show the results. Belgium and The Netherlands followed, and conditions in Sweden are less good than they used to be.

Germany experienced the first inkling of new trouble in the Berlin elections of May 10, 1981, when an ecological party, the "Alternative List," took enough votes away from Social Democrats and Liberals to deprive them of their majority. The group refused to enter a coalition with anyone. The Christian Democrats won 58 of the city's 75 single-member districts but, on account of the P.R. features of the system, ended up with two seats less than a majority. The deadlock was broken only when five Free Democrats decided to support, on a case by case basis, a Christian Democratic government, though their *Landesverband*

had strictly forbidden them to do so and took disciplinary measures against them.

Fourth, the assumption made by *The Economist* not so long ago, that troubles like those recently experienced by Belgium and The Netherlands are due to the failure to use the single-transferable vote, does not square with what happened in the Irish elections of 1981 and 1982: A handful of Independents were in a position to turn the scales between Fianna Fail and the coalition formed by Fine Gael and Labour. The political price paid for the support of some of these people is reported to be high. A responsible policy toward Northern Ireland is said to be made more difficult, and equally so a prudent financial policy, in the country which, apart from Iceland (which also has P.R.), has the highest inflation rate in the Western world.

Lastly, any introduction of P.R. in England is likely to be irreversible. The system tends to create vested interests—minor parties and groups within the major parties—certain to resist any return to plurality voting.

As Professor King correctly reports, British political scientists are excited about the impending changes. The prospect is ambivalent. A victory of the Alliance in the forthcoming general elections could do much to make the British political system more responsive, in particular if it comes primarily at the expense of Labour's left. The introduction of P.R., however, would begin by threatening the unity of the Alliance, and change the entire British party—and constitutional—system.

Perhaps there is still time to set up a committee charged first with identifying the major points of difference in the interpretation of these events, and then with letting those of its members who favor P.R. state their views while a group critical of P.R. does the same. Thus, a set of "options for action" could be developed. Political leaders as well as the general public would be better informed than they are at a time when one side seems favored over the other. This was the case with the commission on electoral systems set up by the Hansard Society. When its members were ap-

pointed *The Economist* reported that a majority favored P.R. The pertinent issues are so vital for the future of British democracy that both sides should be given their full day in court.

Ferdinand A. Hermens  
American University

## 1982 Annual Meeting Program

Because of their brevity, headlines frequently miss important parts of news stories. But in the article, "Finifter Prepares Program for 1982 Annual Meeting" (*PS*, Winter 1982, p. 92), both headline *and* story missed a very significant part of the subject, the contribution of the Section Chairs.

The preparation of the Annual Meeting program is very much a team effort in which the Section Chairs play major roles. They seek out the best new research in each area and they evaluate many hundreds of paper proposals and other requests to participate at the Annual Meeting. From their own ideas and all this input, they attempt to construct a limited number of coherent panels that will bring together people and research subjects in a way that will be useful and interesting to both participants and audience. This year they have had the additional challenge of establishing special "theme" panels on the state of theory and research in each area. It is virtually impossible to do this job well without devoting enormous amounts of thought, time, and energy to it.

These unsung heroes of the Association deserve the recognition and gratitude of the membership for their truly devoted efforts to bring to the Annual Meeting panels the best of what the discipline has to offer each year. They certainly have mine!

The headline for the story on the 1982 Annual Meeting program should have read:

Bueno de Mesquita, Clausen, Cook, Finifter, Gunnell, Hansen, Hopkins, Inglehart, James, Jennings, Lijphart, Lynn, Mayhew, Migdal, Prestage, Schick,

Shepsle, Sullivan, Walker, and Wolfinger  
Prepare Program for 1982 Annual  
Meeting.

Ada W. Finifter  
Michigan State University  
1982 APSA Annual Meeting  
Program Chairperson

### Visitor Seeks Help

I will be visiting the USA for a period  
of study-leave August-December 1982.  
Can anyone help with—

a) *A research project on the teaching of  
politics through literature:* Would anyone  
who is currently or has recently taught  
courses at undergraduate or postgrad-  
uate level which combine the teaching of  
politics and literature please contact me  
as soon as possible? I want to visit,  
observe and discuss as many such  
teaching programs as possible while in  
the USA.

b) *Accommodation:* I will be based in  
Washington, D.C. with my husband who  
will be engaged in research at the Smith-  
sonian Institute. We will need an apart-  
ment or other accommodation for two  
during the period August-December. We  
would be grateful for any information or  
offers of accommodation in the Washing-  
ton area for all or part of that period.  
Thank you.

Maureen Whitebrook  
Departments of Economics and  
Public Administration  
Trent Polytechnic  
Burton Street  
Nottingham, England NG 1 4BU

### Costly Transcripts

As a doctoral candidate who has been  
scanning the current job market in  
political science (e.g., the *APSA Person-  
nel Newsletter Service*), I have concluded  
that far too many departments initially re-  
quire grade transcripts from faculty job  
applicants.

Let me illustrate: Transcripts now cost  
\$3.00 apiece at both Berkeley and Stony  
Brook. Even if a job-hungry doctoral stu-  
dent orders his transcripts in bulk, 20  
Stony Brook transcripts will still cost  
\$60.00.

If this doctoral candidate had pursued his  
M.A. and Ph.D. studies at more than one  
institution (increasingly common during  
cutbacks and economic recession), the  
price tag of \$60.00 can easily double or  
triple. Middle-class doctoral students  
may be able to afford a fee of \$120.00  
or \$180.00 for transcripts, but *most*  
doctoral students cannot. So the tran-  
script requirement places an unequal bur-  
den on applicants.

Therefore, I would recommend that de-  
partments refrain from *initially* requiring  
transcripts of job seekers. Transcripts  
should be required only *after* the candi-  
date has passed preliminary screening by  
the department's search committee.

Ralph W. Bastedo  
SUNY-Stony Brook and  
University of California, Berkeley

### June 1: Summer PS Deadline

The deadline for submission of materials for the summer issue edition of *PS* is June 1. Please indicate in which section submitted material should be placed. Also, items for *PS* should be submitted in *PS* format.