Chapter 6
The Debate over Electoral Systems and Representation

Introduction
The passage of the Direct Elections Bill gave rise to one of the most vociferous debates over electoral systems that Britain had seen for over a generation. Although the proponents of proportional representation did not succeed, the debate is certain to continue.

Although Proportional Representation had been one of the planks of the Lib-Lab pact, the parliamentary balance was never in its favour. The inability of Callaghan and some other Ministers to spread their enthusiasm for PR did not result in retaliatory action from the Liberals despite the well-publicised fury of Cyril Smith at the Government’s failure to deliver the goods and his subsequent resignation. The situation would not have been favourable for a General Election. Not only because there had been bad opinion polls for both Labour and Liberals, but because the Liberals’ policy for forming the pact to safeguard ‘the national interest’ would, as David Steel pointed out at the time, have lost some of its credibility had they resigned on an essentially European issue. Still, the history of the Regional List system must rank as one of the most curious of any of the soundings on electoral systems in Britain. What appeared to be the greatest weapon the Liberals had had since before the War tuned out to be a paper tiger and the espousal of leading members of the government of an electoral system essentially inimical to its interests (as one of the two major parties) turned out to be something of a bluff which was never called. The consequences of the debate, as opposed to the choice of system proper, has been an even greater determination amongst the Liberals that any further arrangements with parties of government will rely on Proportional Representation, not only for Europe (which will probably happen anyway) but for
Westminster. In the event of another hung Parliament, it is paradoxical to see that it could be that a vote against PR for Europe was in fact a vote for PR at Westminster, given the resolve which was borne out of the Liberals’ disillusion.

The Liberal Action Group for Electoral Reform (LAGER) made out a good case for PR, in its most extreme form, the Single Transferable Vote (STV). They drew on reports of the Patijn Convention of 1960 and the Twenty-Second Report of the House of Lords Select Committee on the European Communities (75/6 session), both of which gave high priority to the need to represent all shades of political opinion in each member state. They also cited a speech of Mr. Callaghan’s from the Debate of 29 March 1976 where he referred to the need to ensure ‘adequate representation of the constituent parts of the United Kingdom’. However, in this case Callaghan was referring to geographical constituent parts not political ones. Given that the only other party to obviously benefit from a proportional system of election was the SDLP of Northern Ireland whose case had already been accepted as ‘special’ in its need to be represented, the Liberals were very isolated in their dedication.

Although the Welsh Nationalists were unlikely to gain a seat under the first-past-the-post system without the allocation of well over four seats to Wales, they would have had no extra advantage under a PR system organised Wales-wide either, since the electoral quotient would be 25% and not 10%, their level of vote in the 1974 election. The Scottish Nationalists had the advantage of a vote which was not only high in proportion in Scotland, being 30.4% in October 1974, but also geographically concentrated within the UK as a whole. So, while the first-past-the-post system did not especially favour them for European elections, at the Westminster level it certainly did; consequently they were not strong advocates for change. When Mr. Thorpe asked Reg Underhill, on behalf of the Liberals in Parliament, before the Select Committee, ‘Why should one minority be different from any other?’ it is not surprising that the reply not only placed different emphasis on the conditions of Northern Ireland and the impossibility of it setting any kind of precedent but concluded with, ‘I do not think you can deal with this on fairness ... Any change in the voting system must have some effect upon the political structure ... one is dealing with the whole balance of political life in a particular country’.

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