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Electoral Reform and the Clammy Hands of Centralism

Proportional representation is a device for defeating democracy. It is founded on the principle that the majority should rule which will bring faddists of all kinds into parliament, and cause parties to disintegrate.

David Lloyd George, 1917.1

The British electoral system provides not democracy but the dictatorship of the croupier. One should not trust the destinies of a great nation to a three-card trick.

David Lloyd George, 1929.2

Introduction

David Lloyd George is only one of many British parliamentarians who have flirted with reform in opposition but rejected it in government. Dotty in Tom Stoppard’s (1992, p. 35) play Jumpers states, ‘[I]t’s not the voting that’s democracy, it’s the counting...’ Dotty is referring, of course, to that long-held belief in radical liberal political thought that the first-past-the-post electoral system (FPTP) was designed by political elites to ensure a particular outcome: majority government. By implication, a truly democratic electoral system would have a formal structure amenable to popular control and flexible to a complex and moving political situation. It would be capable of keeping apace with swings in public opinion and changing demography. This perspective is rooted in the opinion that the function of elections is to ensure ‘government by the people’, if only in a limited sense. In stark contrast, the basis of the Labour Party’s traditional defence of FPTP is that it allows for majority government and thus ‘decisive reform’ forged through ‘strong’, executive-led government. It has been argued in this book that this elitist conception of democratic governance has provided the rationale for the Labour leadership’s
traditional opposition to constitutional reform. This argument is especially applicable to the politics of electoral reform.

This chapter explores the Labour Party’s history on electoral reform and provides an account of the weakening of the leadership’s traditional position on electoral reform following the historic vote at the 1990 Party Conference to consider alternatives to the FPTP voting system. Although the National Executive Committee (NEC) rejected the initiative, it was agreed to set up an NEC Working Party on Electoral Systems to be chaired by Professor Raymond Plant. The Working Party served the dual purpose of being a practical companion to Labour’s Charter of Rights and a response to growing electoral reform lobby in the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP). The Plant Committee gave rise to New Labour’s 1997 General Election manifesto commitment to have a national debate on the electoral reform issue, followed by a referendum on FPTP and an alternative electoral system. The Jenkins Independent Commission on the Voting System, appointed in the autumn of 1997, with the remit of developing an alternative to FPTP, was the first step towards meeting this manifesto commitment.

As this is an evolving issue, the chapter offers a formal analysis of the issues at stake in the politics of electoral reform, divided into four parts. It begins with the elaboration of criteria for assessing electoral systems from the perspective of normative liberal democratic theory. This will provide a context for evaluating the competing claims of various personalities in Labour Party history. Part two examines the electoral reform issue historically, contrasting the formative experiences of the labour movement in the 19th century with those of the Labour Party in the first half of the 20th century. This will make it possible to sketch the circumstances underpinning the emergence of the Labour leadership’s traditional commitment to FPTP. Part three discusses the changing attitudes of members of Labour’s front bench in the late-1980s and early-1990s and assesses the influence of the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform (LCER) and other key groups on Labour’s evolving policy agenda. The work and influence of the Plant Committee are then assessed. Part four examines New Labour’s policy on electoral reform in government. The introduction of electoral reform for elections to the European Parliament, the new Wales and Northern Ireland Assemblies and the Scottish Parliament are also considered. The Jenkins Report is examined in some detail, together with the debate over whether a referendum should be held on the voting system. Although Blair remains ‘unpersuaded’ on the need to reform the electoral system for the House of Commons, the creation of a Commission on Electoral Reform and the possibility of a referendum on the issue opened a window of opportunity for change. Thus far, however, resistance by FPTP supporters has been successful.