

TABLET JUNE 2009

Some years ago I was closely involved in an Irish general election on behalf of one Party but cast my vote for the member of another. My family was Fine Gael, but my favourite politician was Mary Robinson who was Labour. The system of voting in place allowed me to stay (fairly) loyal to my tribal allegiance while making a personal, democratic point as well. Ireland's proportional representation (PR) system of the single transferable vote (STV) made this possible: Mary Robinson could be my number one while my own Party candidates could be assigned the 2, 3 and 4 positions. Within this category I could favour those of my Party whose policies I particularly favoured over those whom I disliked. Or if I had been so minded, I could have started with a no-hoper to make a point safe in the knowledge that on his or her being eliminated, my number 2 would 'become' a first preference proper for the candidate in receipt of that stroke.

These are just some of the many subtle ways in which STV fosters intelligence in voters. It is much better than the unsatisfactory proportional system in operation at the recent European elections – the look and feel of those lists of party hacks ordered in accordance with their own status is a dispiriting one for the voter, especially at this time when anger competes with apathy as the prime response to party politics. But STV changes much of that, and were it to be introduced nationally, its impact on the British political process would be immediate, and I believe beneficial. Consider how such a system would have affected the politics of the past twenty years: the voters would have been able to choose which faction within their own party (Euro-sceptic or Euro-enthusiast; New or Old labour?) they preferred as well as choosing their Party itself. Almost certainly the Blair administrations would have needed to have been formed with Liberal Democratic support, leading to a stronger left breakaway than was eventually mustered (as some may recall) by Arthur Scargill. The same kind of splitting would probably have earlier occurred to the Tories under John Major – buoyed by a real chance of success more Tories would have followed their instincts into UKIP, or even the BNP. The result would have been a variegated House of Commons which would more properly have reflected the mood of the country than at any given point over the past

two decades has been allowed by the falsely named 'first past the post' system (there is no post, and 'first' means merely most, not the majority of, votes).

This is surely all even more true today than it has been in the past. It is time to embrace rather than to continue to shun the splintering that would be encouraged by STV. Maybe there was a role for two large monolithic parties at a time when the world had merely two truths (capital or labour) to choose from and each Party's discipline was enforced more by belief in the cause than by fear of the whips and/or ambition for high office. Such levels of certainty in two simple alternatives are impossible today and the electoral process should acknowledge this, rather than (as is the case at present) force differences behind the scenes under the spurious cover of a pseudo-united Party.

It was once thought that for all its faults the British electoral system at least kept out the extremist right-wing parties, but even if such procedural sleight-of-hand is justifiable as a means of silencing voices the mainstream does not want to hear (and surely there is a degree of democratic dubiousness to it), the trick is increasingly failing to deliver. How long will it be even under the current voting system before the BNP makes a 'breakthrough' at a Westminster election? Better to name and deal with the Devil than to force him to do his cancerous work within the body politic in secret.

Another supposed objection to STV is that it turns all politicians into devotees of the parish pump, eschewing the international, indeed even the national, stages while protecting with fanatical localism a majority which under PR can never be deemed truly safe. Perhaps this is the case, but why cannot a well-resourced politician do both? Garret Fitzgerald managed it in Ireland, as did (in his own inimitable way) Charles Haughey. It is hard to see why if you are good enough it cannot be both/and rather than either/are. Instead of losing Sedgefield or Finchley, a Tony Blair or Margaret Thatcher would have brought lesser colleagues in on their surpluses.

Finally there is the *canard* that strong government requires the kind of disempowering, distorted electoral system to which the British have grown used. But various forms of PR have hardly served the Swedens and the Germanys of this world particularly badly – and Fianna Fail has not dominated Irish politics without

working out that STV may change the way you get power but it does not render the pursuit impossible of achievement. In any event what a democracy needs is not strong but effective government: the British obsession with single party power nowadays coalescing around individuals rather than ideology has delivered a presidential style of government that has often been ineffective precisely because the cabal at the core of government has believed itself strong.

The last Labour administration to find itself in the position that Gordon Brown is in today went to the polls eschewing change and suffered electoral slaughter at the hands of Margaret Thatcher. Gordon Brown should not make the same mistake. There is still time to achieve a strong parliamentary consensus for just this constitutional reform: it will be supported by the Liberal Democrats and perhaps by at least some Tories in both Houses. With his fairly paltry share of the popular vote despite all his rebranding and media-enhanced popularity, David Cameron cannot afford to ditch the unfair voting system on which his success in 2010 depends. For Labour the added bonus would be to see Cameron forced to defend the indefensible. Doing the right thing for the wrong reason is the stuff of politics, and disguising this effectively is called statesmanship.