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In the recent debates about electoral reform in Britain relatively little attention has been devoted to the Alternative Vote - that system of election which requires the voter to rank the candidates in order of preference, and which takes the voters' lower preferences into consideration if the counting of first preferences fails to produce a candidate with an overall majority.[1] The electoral reform debate has focused on the deficiences of the established relative majority system, the desirability (or otherwise) of the principle of 'proportional representation', and the strengths and weaknesses of the various systems that seek to achieve that end. For the most part, the Alternative Vote has remained a forgotten option for British electoral reformers.[2]

This relative neglect of the Alternative Vote is surprising. In the first place, the Alternative Vote has a respectable pedigree as an electoral reform proposal in Britain. It emerged as a serious proposal on two occasions this century when the Labour and Liberal parties were concerned about the dangers of splitting the anti-Conservative vote (that is, in the hung Parliaments of 1910-18 and 1929-31).[3] Its introduction in Britain was advocated by the Royal Commission on Electoral Systems in 1910, and by the Speaker's Conference on Electoral Reform in 1917. It came close to adoption in 1917 and 1931: on each occasion it was incorporated in a Government Bill, and received the approval of the House of Commons, but was rejected by the Lords.

Further, the specific anomaly that the Alternative Vote can remove (that of the MP elected with less than half the votes) has become much more common in Britain in the last fifteen years. In the elections of 1945-70, on average, only about a fifth of winning

candidates failed to secure an overall majority. In 1983, however, over half of the winning candidates lacked an overall majority, while in February and October 1974 the proportion was close to two-thirds. Whereas the election of minority MPs was once just a minor aberration, it has been a central feature of recent British general elections.

Clearly, doubts are cast on the legitimacy of any electoral process that produces a 'winner' who has more people voting against him that for him. At the very least, justice is not seen to be done. The 'verdict of the electorate' is ambiguous, the contest appears to be un-finished, and the question inevitably is raised of what would have been the outcome if the contest had continued until someone did achieve an overall majority. Where there are a large number of such 'un-finished' contests in a general election, doubts are raised about the credibility of the whole electoral process. As Enid Lakeman has pointed out:[4]

> "Election on a minority vote is an anomaly very obvious to the voters concerned and it is not tolerated by any of the British parties when electing its leader."

Concern about the consequences of the increase in the number of 'un-finished' contests in recent elections, however, has been overshadowed by the wider issue of 'proportional representation'. The disproportional relationship between the parties' votes and seats, particularly in the 1983 election, has appeared as a more glaringly unsatisfactory aspect of the established electoral system than has the election of an increased number of minority MPs.

If a proportional electoral system, such as the Single Transferable Vote or a Party List system, was to be adopted in

Britain, the problem of the minority MP would be removed as a by-product. The concept of 'an overall majority for one candidate' is meaningless in the multi-member constituencies that are required for the Single Transferable Vote or Regional Party List systems, or in the nationwide constituency that is required for the National Party List system.

Proportional electoral systems, however, encounter three types of resistance.[5] First, the very principle of proportional representation is suspected by some precisely because the representation of parties in proportion to their votes is likely to make hung Parliaments, and thus minority or coalition governments, a lasting feature of British politics. Supporters of the system of single party majority governments condemn proportional representation for the very reasons that critics of the adversarial system support it.

Second, even among those who favour the principle of proportional representation, there are many who have reservations about the particular electoral methods that are employed to achieve the desired end. Not least of these limitations is the fact that of the several electoral methods that are classed as proportional systems, only the National List system can guarantee an outcome in which there is a strict relationship between a party's votes and seats. The Single Transferable Vote and the Regional List systems normally do achieve a fairly close relationship between a party's votes and seats, but they certainly cannot be guaranteed to produce a strictly proportional outcome.

Third, proportional systems require multi-member constituencies

or the elimination of all constituencies, but single-member constituencies are a particularly well-entrenched feature of the British political system.[6] Despite the many acknowledged deficiencies of the single-member system, there is a large body of opinion that is wary of any electoral reform would involve their elimination.

Should the introduction of a proportional electoral system prove to be unattainable, the Alternative Vote remains in the wings as a more limited electoral reform option. While the Alternative Vote would not deal directly with the problem of disproportional representation, it would tackle the less spectacular, but still very real, problem of the election of large numbers of minority MPs.

But is there any real likelihood of the Alternative Vote being introduced in the foreseeable future, and if it was to be introduced what would be the consequences? Before considering these questions in the following pages it is necessary to set the scene by examining the precise extent, and cause, of the increase in the number of minority MPs in recent British general elections.

The Increase in Minority MPs

The number of minority MPs elected in each general election since 1918 is shown in Table I. It can be seen that during the three-party competition of the 1920s about a third of MPs, on average, were elected without an overall majority (though the proportion was rather higher than this in 1929 and somewhat lower in 1924). In the hey-day of two-party competition between 1931 and 1959 the proportion of minorty MPs was normally less than a sixth, but with the return to

TABLE I

British General Elections 1918-83: Minority MPs

	N	Minority MPs as % of All MPs.
1918	97	14.5
1922	173	30.0
1923	203	35.2
1924	124	21.5
1929	310	53.8*
1931	34	5.9
1935	58	10.1
1945	174	29.0*
1950	187	29.9*
1951	39	6.2
1955	37	5.9
1959	80	12.7
1964	232	36.8*
1966	185	29.4*
1970	124	19.7
1974F	408	64.3*
1974O	380	59.8*
1979	207	32.6
1983	334	51.4

Source: F.W.S. Craig, British Electoral Facts 1885-1975. London 1976, p. 101; The Times Guide to the House of Commons 1979 and 1983

* Labour wins (all others Conservative wins).

three-party politics in the 1960s and 1970s the number of minority MPs increased. In 1964 and 1966 the number reached the levels of the 1920s, and in the last four elections there has been a further increase to a level well beyond that of the 1920s.

What are the circumstances that produce a large number of minority MPs? Clearly, the first condition is for a large proportion of constituencies to have three of more candidates, but it is not simply the case that the greater the number of candidates in an election, the greater the number of minority MPs that will emerge. A large number of poorly-supported third-party candidates may well have less of an impact upon the ratio of majority to minority MPs than would a smaller number of well-supported third-party candidates. In the 1950 general election, for example, the Liberals contested 475 of the 625 seats, and the Communists and others contested 156. Support for the Liberals and 'others' was so uniformly low, however, that 70 per cent of the contests still produced an MP with an overall majority.

Even when the third-party candidates do attract a respectable share of the vote, the consequences of this for the balance between majority and minority MPs will depend further upon the closeness of the battle between the two main parties. If the leading party in any particular seat is strong enough to secure half the votes, it is immaterial if the remaining half is divided more or less evenly between the other parties. Thus minority MPs will be most numerous in general elections when there are a large number of third-party candidates who are well-supported in constituencies in which the two main parties are fairly well matched.

Are these conditions more evident in Britain today than they were in the past? The nature of inter-party competition has changed considerably in the last twenty years, with elections becoming much less of an exclusively two-party confrontation than was the case previously. Some indications of this are provided in Table II, which shows the average number of candidates per seat and the types of contest that emerged in each election since 1918.

It can be seen that the number of candidates contesting elections has increased considerably. In the 1918 to 1970 period the variations in the number of candidates from one election to another were not great. The average number of candidates per seat was never greater than 3.0, and was usually less than 2.5. The number of candidates rose slightly in the 1960s, however, and then more dramatically in the 1970s, reaching 3.5 in 1974 and 4.0 in the last two elections.

Until the 1960s 'straight-fights' between the two main parties were the norm. Of the elections between 1918 and 1959, only in 1929, 1945 and 1950 did multi-candidate contests out-number straight-fights. In the elections of the 1960s and 1970s, however, the number of straight-fights declined dramatically, and in 1983 there were none at all.

It is also the case that third and fourth party candidates have been better-supported in recent elections than they were in the past. Some measure of this is provided by Table III, which shows for each election since 1918 the parties' share of the vote and the average votes per candidate. It can be seen that the two main parties secured around ninety per cent of the vote in the elections of 1931 to

TABLE II

British General Elections 1918-83: Types of Contest

	Types of Contest				
	Un-opposed	Straight Fights	Three Cands.	Four + Cands.	Candidates Per Seat
1918	15.1	46.4	31.5	7.0	2.3
1922	8.3	50.9	36.8	4.0	2.3
1923	7.1	48.6	44.1	0.2	2.4
1924	5.2	55.2	38.7	0.9	2.3
1929	0.9	17.0	77.6	4.5	2.8
1931	9.4	71.0	17.2	2.4	2.1
1935	5.9	67.5	25.3	1.2	2.2
1945	0.5	43.1	48.4	8.0	2.6
1950	0.3	18.1	64.8	16.8	3.0
1951	0.6	79.2	19.5	0.6	2.2
1955	0	77.6	21.1	1.3	2.2
1959	0	59.2	37.8	3.0	2.4
1964	0	30.8	60.2	9.0	2.8
1966	0	37.1	55.4	7.5	2.7
1970	0	29.4	52.1	18.6	2.9
1974F	0	6.0	58.3	35.7	3.4
1974O	0	0	54.5	45.5	3.5
1979	0	0.5	27.2	72.3	4.1
1983	0	0	38.6	61.4	4.0

Source: F.W.S. Craig, British Electoral Facts 1885-1975, London 1976; The Times, Guide to the House of Commons 1979 and 1983.

1970, but that their share of the vote fell considerably in the 1970's, and in 1983 declined to the level of the 1920's. Whereas in 1951 and 1955 the Liberals and 'others' secured around three per cent of the vote, in 1983 they achieved thirty per cent.

To some extent the increase in the minor parties' share of the vote is a reflection of the greater number of minor party candidates now contesting elections, but Table III also shows that the Liberals' average vote per candidate has been maintained. Despite the fact that in the last five elections the Liberals have contested seats that previously would have been regarded as un-rewarding, their candidates' average share of the vote has actually increased. Indeed in 1983 the Alliance contested every seat in Great Britain but their average vote per candidate was still higher than that achieved by the Liberals in any election except 1931 (when the Liberals contested only a small number of relatively promising seats).

Further, in elections since 1970 Liberal or Nationalist candidates have won a greater number of seats than previously, and have achieved second place in an even larger number. In the 1950's and 1960's the bulk of those seats that were contested by more than two candidates were virtual straight-fights, with the Labour and Conservative candidates placed firmly first and second, with the Liberal, or occasional Nationalist, candidate invariably finishing a very poor third. Labour and the Conservatives have continued to win the vast majority of seats, but increasingly the winning party's principal rival in any particular constitiency has been a Liberal, SDP or Nationalist candidate, rather than the candidate of the other main party. Thus in 1983 Labour and Conservative candidates filled the top two places in only a third of the contests, whereas in 1951 they had

TABLE III

British General Elections 1918-83 : Parties' Share of the Vote

	Parties' Share of the Vote (%)				Average Votes Per Candidate(000s)			
	Con.	Lab.	Lib	Other	Con.	Lab.	Lib.	Other
1918	38.6	20.8	25.6	15.0	9.3	6.2	6.6	4.1
1922	38.5	29.7	28.3	3.5	11.4	10.2	8.6	8.4
1923	38.0	30.7	29.7	1.6	10.3	10.4	9.4	11.2
1924	46.8	33.3	17.8	2.1	14.7	10.7	8.6	9.0
1929	38.1	37.1	23.6	1.2	14.7	14.7	10.3	5.4
1931	60.5	30.8	7.2	1.5	22.5	12.9	12.8	4.9
1935	53.3	38.1	6.8	1.8	20.2	15.1	9.0	9.1
1945	39.6	48.0	9.0	3.4	16.1	19.9	7.4	5.8
1950	43.5	46.1	9.1	1.3	20.2	21.5	5.5	2.5
1951	48.0	48.8	2.6	0.6	22.2	22.6	6.7	6.0
1955	49.7	46.4	2.7	1.2	21.3	20.0	6.6	5.8
1959	49.3	43.9	5.9	0.9	22.0	19.7	7.6	3.4
1964	43.4	44.1	11.2	1.3	19.1	19.4	8.5	2.6
1966	41.9	48.1	8.5	1.5	18.1	21.1	7.5	2.9
1970	46.4	43.1	7.5	3.0	20.9	19.5	6.4	3.5
1974F	37.9	37.2	19.3	5.6	19.1	18.7	11.7	4.7
1974O	35.8	39.2	18.3	6.7	16.8	18.4	8.6	4.9
1979	43.9	36.9	13.8	5.4	22.0	18.5	7.5	1.1
1983	42.4	27.6	25.4	4.6	20.6	13.4	12.3	2.1

Source: F.W.S. Craig, British Electoral Facts 1885-1975, London 1976; The Times Guide to the House of Commons 1979 and 1983.

managed this in ninety-six per cent of the contents.

Thus the predominantly two-party competition of the 1950's and 1960's has been replaced in recent elections by multi-party competition: more candidates are contesting elections and the minor parties are achieving both a larger absolute share of the vote and a larger share of the vote in each constituency. As a consequence there has been a considerable increase in the number of candidates who are elected without receiving an overall majority of votes. This anomaly would be ended by the introduction of the Alternative Vote. Is there any real likelihood of this reform coming about?

The Alternative Vote Option.

Currently, majority opinion in each of the main parties favours the retention of the established electoral system, while the Alliance's primary commitment is to the Single Transferable Vote.[7] In a hung Parliament, however, the need for inter-party agreement is imperative if the Government is to survive. The sort of electoral reform that might emerge from a Parliamentary situation in which the Alliance held the balance between Labour and the Conservatives, is far from clear. A minority Labour or Conservative Government, or a coalition of which the Alliance was a member, might accept the Single Transferable Vote as the price of survival. Alternatively, such a government might be prepared to make concessions to the Alliance on various items of policy, but not on electoral reform. If the issue was passed to the electorate through a referendum, general enthusiasm for the principle of 'proportional representation' might not extend to the particular system that was proposed.

Given these uncertainties, it is at least conceivable that the Alternative Vote could emerge as a compromise between the Alliance's commitment to reform and the Labour and Conservative attachment to the status quo. Such a compromise could be presented as 'a meaningful electoral reform' without undermining the main parties' attachment to single-member constituencies or their aversion to proportional representation.

Alliance policy is for the introduction of the Single Transferable Vote in 'community constituencies', mainly of four or five members. At the same time, the Alliance favours the use of the Alternative Vote in four single-member constituencies of Caithness, Isle of Wight, Orkney, and Western Isles. These four exceptions are regarded as necessary because the multi-member constituencies required for the Single Transferable Vote are inappropriate for small 'natural' units such as the Isle of Wight and the Scottish islands, and would involve huge geographical areas in the more sparsely populated parts of the country. Once it is established that it is desirable to have exceptions to the general principle of multi-member constituencies, the list of special cases could grow as the parties in a hung Parliament sought to devise a mutually acceptable reform package.

The principle of operating two electoral systems together would not be new. Currently, in elections for the European Parliament the Single Transferable Vote is used in Northern Ireland and the first-past-the-post system in Great Britain. The Single Transferable Vote was used for some university seats between 1918 and 1948, and the Limited Vote in just thirteen constituencies between 1867 and 1884. The 1916-17 Speakers Conference proposed the combination of the Single Transferable Vote for the three-member constituencies then in

existence and the Alternative Vote for all the single-member constituencies.[8]

The 1918 Representation of the People Bill, in its original form, sought to implement this particular mix.[9] Subsequently, the Single Transferable Vote clause was removed from the Bill, and the Alternative Vote extended to all constituencies. This amendment was made, however, not because uniformity was regarded as desirable in itself, but because the Single Transferable Vote was seen as unacceptable even in just some constituencies. When the House of Lords later rejected the Alternative Vote clause, the Government proposed the compromise combination of the Alternative Vote in urban seats and the simple-majority system in rural seats (but the Lords rejected this also).

Thus there are precedents for having different electoral systems for different types of seats. The particular mix of the Single Transferable Vote in urban seats and the Alternative Vote in rural seats did operate for thirty years or so in Provincial elections in Alberta and Manitoba, where multi-member rural constituencies would have covered huge areas of sparsely-populated land. It is a practical combination in that both systems involve preferential (rather than categorical) voting.[10] The voters' task would differ only in that the urban voter would be faced with a longer list of candidates than his rural counterpart.

Certainly, the Conservatives' rural strength, and Labour's strength in the cities, could encourage the Conservatives to accept a combination of the Single Transferable Vote for urban seats and a single-member system (either the established system or the Alternative

Vote) for rural seats. Such a package would help the COnservatives to undermine Labour's urban strength (and in particular would allow the Conservatives to break into Labour's near monopoly of representation in some of the large cities) without undermining the Conservatives' rural dominance. While the Conservatives might prefer to retain the established system for the single-member constituencies in any such package, they might be obliged to accept the Alternative Vote by pressure from the Alliance and by the logic of operating a system of preferential voting in all constituencies.

At the very least, it is likely that if the Single Transferable Vote was to be adopted in Britain, the Alternative Vote would be used for by-elections (which are inevitably single-member contests). It is hardly practical to have a system of ordinal voting in general elections, but categorical voting in by-elections.. In the Republic of Ireland, and in local government elections in Northern Ireland, the Single Transferable Vote system is accompanied by the use of the Alternative Vote in by-elections,[11] and the Alliance proposal is that this should be the pattern throughout the United Kingdom.

Thus, the Alternative Vote could emerge in Britain in various forms — as a universal system in all constituencies, or in just some constituencies as part of a hybrid system, or simply in by-elections under the Single Transferable Vote system. Certainly, if the Alternative Vote did emerge as a compromise reform in a hung Parliament, it would not be the first time that an inter-party agreement took the form of an option that neither side particularly favoured. If it was to be adopted, what would be the consequences?

Consequences of the Alternative Vote

The most direct consequence of the introduction of the Alternative Vote would be that the winning candidate in each constituency could emerge with an overall majority of votes rather than just a simple majority. A major electoral anomaly would thereby be avoided, the winning candidate's legitimacy would be enhanced and the credibility of the whole electoral process improved.

One price that has to be paid for this happy outcome is that the voters task would be more complicated than under a system of categorical voting. Spoilt papers and abstentions might be expected to increase, though in this respect much would depend on whether the voter was required to indicate a full list of preferences for his vote to be valid (as is the case with the operation of the Alternative Vote in Australia) or whether he was free to indicate as few or as many preferences as he wished.

With any system of preferential voting the counting process is more protracted than under the first-past-the-post system. In a contest in which there are a large number of candidates it may take several counts to produce a winner (who may, in any case, be the person who led on the first count). Comparative evidence suggests, however, that neither the voting nor the counting procedures are major limitations to the effectiveness and acceptability of the system.[12] Certainly, the Alternative Vote is a much less elaborate electoral system than is the Single Transferable Vote, with its mult-member constituencies, long lists of candidates and truly protracted counting procedures.

The Alternative Vote makes it possible for allied parties to run in tandem, competing with each other for first preferences but arranging to exchange their supporters' second preferences. Thus in a British Alternative Vote election the Liberals and Social Democrats could either continue to divide the seats between them as they did in 1983, or change to a strategy of competing with each other in some, or perhaps all, of the seats.

This strategy avoids the inter-party conflicts involved in the process of seat allocation.[13] It also has the advantage that each of the allied candidates is likely to have a personal following that can be transferred to the ally through second preferences. Thus the surviving allied candidate should be able to attract more support (in the form of first and second preferences) than if he had contested the seat as a single 'agreed' candidate.

Ultimately, of course, the viability of the tactic of allies running in tandem depends on the extent to which the parties' supporters are prepared to participate in an arrangement to exchange second preferences. Initially, at least, there is likely to be some 'slippage' in the delivery of second preferences to an ally. If parties can achieve an efficient mutual exchange of second preferences, however, the tactic can be electorally beneficial.

By eliminating the notion of the 'wasted' vote, the Alternative Vote makes it possible for a third party to achieve something like its full electoral potential. With categorical voting, a third-party supporter must choose between 'wasting' his vote by giving it to his party, or using it 'usefully' to influence the battle between the two main parties. With the Alternative Vote, however, a third-party

supporter can give his first preference to his own party but still influence the outcome of the contest by giving his second preference to one of the two main contenders.

A third party can capitalise on the fact that in an Alternative Vote election it may well be the second preferences of its supporters that will determine the outcome. Positively, it can bargain with the main parties in order to secure concessions on policy in return for an agreement over second preferences. Negatively, it can encourage its supporters to use their second preferences to help to defeat the party to which it is most opposed. In this respect a third party's bargaining position will be strongest when there are a large number of contests that go beyond the first count; when the third party is not tied firmly to either of the other parties; when the third party has sufficient influence over its supporters to be able to deliver their second preferences; and (ironically) when it is recognised to be the weakest party in the contest and thus likely to be eliminated after the first count.

While a third party's vote is likely to be higher under the Alternative Vote than under the existing system, its share of seats (as is discussed in the next section) will increase only under certain conditions. Thus the relationship between the parties' votes and seats might be no more proportional, and might well be less proportional, than under the first-past-the-post system.

Nevertheless, the Alternative Vote can achieve some of the ends that are sought by advocates of proportional representation. Some electoral reformers advocate proportional representation simply because they regard the disproportionality of the established system

as 'unfair'. Others, however, advocate proportional representation as a means to the end of diluting the confrontational characteristics of party competition in Britain.[14] This latter objective can be achieved by the Alternative Vote as well as by proportional systems.

In the first place, under the Alternative Vote (as under any preferential voting system) the voter is encouraged to think not of a categorical choice between adversaries, but of a relative ordering of candidates. The extent of the voter's support for his first choice is qualified by his subsidiary commitments that are expressed through his second and subsequent preferences.

Further, to secure the maximum electoral benefit from the Alternative Vote the parties are required to come to terms with each other. Whether or not this extends to the creation of formal electoral pacts, the parties will be encouraged to appear attractive to each other through their policies, rhetoric and image. Ideological moderation will be encouraged, while electoral cooperation might act as a stimulus to cooperation in Parliament and in government. In these ways the adversarial pattern of party competition can be undermined, and at least some of the consequences of proportional representation be achieved by other means. Regardless of such general consequences of the Alternative Vote, however, what would be the likely impact of the system on particular parties?

The Impact on the Parties.

The gains and losses that any particular party might expect to experience under the Alternative Vote will depend upon three main

factors — the number of contests in which the party achieves an overall majority in the initial count; the number of 'hung' contests in which the party is placed second in the initial count; the ability of the party to attract the second preferences of other parties' supporters. The first of these factors is clearly the most fundamental. When, in an Alternative Vote election, each party wins the bulk of its seats with an overall majority on the first count, the system is little different from first-past-the-post. The second-preference support that the parties enjoy is irrelevent to the outcome. Other things being equal, the party that wins the greatest number of seats with overall majorities under the first-past-the-post system has least to fear from the Alternative Vote.

An indication of the British parties' ability to achieve overall majorities under the present system is given in Table IV, which shows the party distribution of minority MPs in elections since 1918. It can be seen that in every election the Conservatives have had more minority MPs than any other party, and usually have had appreciably more than any other party. On average, the Conservatives have had between a half and two-thirds of the minority MPs, Labour has had under a third while the Liberals and others have accounted for about a tenth. Apart from 1923, 1929 and 1983 the Conservatives have always had over half of the minority MPs, and on a number of occasions they have had over two-thirds.

Table IV also indicates the balance within each Parliamentary party between majority and minority MPs. In the elections of 1918 to 1924 the ratio of majority to minority MPs was broadly the same in each party: majority MPs far outnumbered minority MPs, and this was true for all three parties. In 1929, however, the Liberal ranks

contained a much bigger proportion of minority MPs than was the case with the other two parties, and this pattern has been repeated in almost every election since then (the only exceptions being 1945, 1951, and February 1974). In effect, with the collapse of the Liberal vote in the inter-war period, the number of Liberal MPs fell and the proportion of Liberal MPs who managed to secure an overall majority also declined.

It may be noted, however, that in the post-war period the proportion of Liberal MPs elected without an overall majority of votes has been highest (ironically) when the party has done relatively well. In those elections in which the Liberals have been driven back into their few safe seats (as in 1951), those seats have nevertheless been won with an overall majority. When, on the other hand, Liberal fortunes have improved, and the party has captured a large number of new seats (as in February 1974), most of these seats have been won with just a simple majority. Labour and/or the Conservatives have a reasonably large core of supporters in almost every constituency, so that even when the Liberals do manage to squeeze ahead of them both, only rarely do they manage to capture half of the votes.

As far as the balance between majority and minority MPs in each of the two main parties is concerned, there is a clear contrast between the inter-war and post-war periods. Between the wars, minority MPs usually constituted a slightly larger proportion of Labour ranks than of Conservative ranks. Only in 1923 and 1929 was this not the case. In each election between 1945 and 1979, in contrast, the proportion of Conservative MPs lacking an overall majority was greater than the proportion of Labour MPs. This was the case in elections in which the Conservatives did badly (as in 1945 and

TABLE IV

British General Elections 1918-83: Minority MPs By Party

	Party's Share of Minority MPs[a]			Minority MPs as Share of Party's MPs[b]		
	Con.	Lab.	Lib.	Con.	Lab.	Lib.
1918	51.5	17.5	21.6	13.1	29.8	12.9
1922	50.9	31.2	16.2	25.6	38.0	24.3
1923	44.3	32.0	22.7	34.9	34.0	29.1
1924	64.5	26.6	5.6	19.4	21.9	17.5
1929	48.7	38.1	12.9	58.1	41.1	67.8
1931	61.8	11.8	23.5	4.0	7.7	21.6
1935	53.4	29.3	12.1	7.2	11.0	33.3
1945	51.1	40.8	1.2	42.4	18.1	16.7
1950	56.7	40.6	2.7	35.6	24.1	55.5
1951	64.1	35.9	-	7.8	4.7	-
1955	67.6	29.7	2.7	7.2	4.0	16.7
1959	58.8	38.7	2.5	12.9	12.0	33.3
1964	66.4	30.6	3.0	50.7	22.4	77.8
1966	70.8	23.2	5.9	51.8	11.8	91.7
1970	54.8	38.7	4.8	20.6	16.7	100.0
1974F	56.1	36.8	2.2	77.1	49.8	64.3
1974O	58.9	34.5	2.9	80.9	41.1	84.6
1979	52.2	40.1	2.9	31.9	31.0	54.5
1983	49.1	42.2	4.5	41.3	67.5	65.2

a. Figures do not necessarily add up to 100 per cent as some minority MPs were from other parties.

b. Alliance in 1983.

Source: F.W.S. Craig, British Electoral Facts 1885-1975, London 1976, p. 101; The Times Guide to the House of Commons 1979, and 1983.

1966) as well as in elections in which they did well (as in 1959.) The 1983 election provides the only post-war exception to this, with just two-fifths of Conservative MPs being elected without an overall majority, compared with two-thirds of Labour MPs.

Thus taking Table IV as a whole it can be seen that the relatively consistent pattern in the parties' shares of minority MPs (that emerges from the three left-hand columns) hides the considerable change that has taken place in each party's balance between minority and majority MPs (that emerges from the three right-hand columns). Between the wars the large Conservative share of minority MPs was simply a reflection of the fact that in every inter-war election except 1929 the Conservatives were much the largest party in the House. In these elections the number of Conservative minority MPs was greater than the number of Labour minority MPs, but these minority MPs constituted a slightly smaller proportion of the total number of Conservative MPs than was the case with Labour.

Between 1945 and 1979, in contrast, the Conservative Party emerged from every election (win or lose) with both a larger number and a larger proportion of minority MPs in its ranks than did Labour. Labour's relatively small proportion of minority MPs was largely a reflection of the geographical distribution of its support. At least until 1983 Labour accumulated big overall majorities in its many ultra-safe industrial seats, and these seats produced a large number of MPs with very large majorities. In 1983, however, Labour's fortunes declined, and third party support increased, to such an extent that even in many of its 'safe' seats Labour was able to accumulate only a simple majority of votes.

Given the general post-1945 pattern, a much larger number of Labour than Conservative candidates would be elected on the first count in an Alternative Vote election. Indeed, on the basis of most post-war elections, only about half as many Labour seats as Conservative or Liberal seats would be put at risk through the allocation of second preferences. Labour might thus seem to have less to fear from the introduction of the Alternative Vote than would the Conservatives.

There are, however, two major qualifications to this. First, any suggestion that Labour might gain from the overall pattern that is revealed by Table IV has to be qualified by the picture that emerged in the 1983 election. In 1983, for the first time since 1935, minority MPs constituted a larger proportion of the PLP than of Conservative MPs (and a substantially larger proportion at that). Although the Conservatives still emerged from the 1983 election with a larger number of minority MPs than did Labour, the Conservatives accounted for less than half of minority MPs for the first time since 1929, while Labour's share was greater than in any previous election.

Second, as noted above, the balance between majority and minority MPs is only one of the factors that will determine the gains and losses that a party can expect to make under the Alternative Vote. The second important factor is the number of contests in which the party is placed second in the initial count. A party that consistently fails to achieve second place in a three-party contest cannot benefit from the Alternative Vote, as it will be eliminated from the contest before it can capitalise on any second-preference support it might have. The second preferences of its supporters will determine the outcome of the battle between the other parties

(and it might be able to exert some influence on these parties as a result), but it will not itself be able to gain any additional seats. If, on the other hand, a party can achieve second place in a number of seats, it might be able to leap-frog to victory with the help of the second preferences of the eliminated candidate's supporters. Which of the parties is best-placed in this respect?

Leap-Frogging to Victory.

The number of seats in which each party was placed second in the 1983 general election is shown in Table V. As well as winning sixty per cent of the seats the Conservatives achieved second place in another quarter. The scale of Labour's defeat in 1983 is reflected in the fact that it managed second place in just a fifth of the seats. The Alliance emerges as overwhelmingly the 'champion runner-up'. If the Northern Ireland seats are discounted, the Alliance was placed second in virtually half the seats in 1983 — a remarkable performance for a 'third' party. This reflects the fact that in large parts of the country (principally the home counties and south-west of England) the Alliance in 1983 replaced Labour as the principal alternative to the Conservatives.

Within the Alliance the Liberals did appreciably better than the SDP. The two parties contested the same number of seats, but as well as winning more seats the Liberals achieved almost twice as many second places as the SDP. In all, the Liberals were first or second in two-thirds of the seats that they contested, while the SDP achieved first or second place in just over a third of their contests.

TABLE V

Party Placings: British General Election 1983

	Seats Won	Runner-up 'Hung' Contests a.	Runner-up Overall Majority Contests	Total
Con	397	129	52	578
Lab.	209	108	21	338
Lib.	17	37	155	209
SDP	6	41	82	129
	)34	)78	)237	)338
Nat.	4	7	1	12
Other	17	12	5	34
Total	650	334	316	1300

a. That is, constituencies in which the winning candidate failed to achieve an overall majority of the votes.

Source: Author's calculations from D.E. Butler and D. Kavanagh, The British General Election 1983, London, 1984, pp. 305-28.

In the context of the Alternative Vote, however, the most important consideration is not the total number of seats in which a party is placed second, but the number of hung contests in which it is second. It can be seen from Table V that while the Alliance was the champion runner-up, it was in second place predominantly in seats in which the winner secured an overall majority. In all, just a quarter of the Alliance's second places were in hung seats, compared with three-quarters of Labour and Conservative second places. The SDP did better than the Liberals in this respect: although the Liberals were second in far more seats than the SDP, the SDP was second in slightly more hung seats than were the Liberals.

A more detailed analysis of the order of the parties in the 334 hung contests in the 1983 election is presented in Table VI. The Alliance was runner-up in appreciably more Conservative hung seats than Labour hung seats. Had the 1983 result emerged in an Alternative Vote election, agreement between the Alliance and Labour to exchange second preferences would have put fifty-six Conservative seats within the reach of the Alliance. An agreement between the Alliance and the Conservatives, on the other hand, would have put just twenty-two Labour seats within the Alliance's reach.

It is clear, however, that (at least on the basis of the 1983 results) the Alliance would benefit much less from an 'exchange of preferences' agreement than would its partner (whichever of the main parties that might be). The Conservatives were second in 118 Labour hung seats and Labour in 102 Conservative hung seats: whichever party could attract the second preferences of Alliance voters would have a considerable number of hung seats within its reach.

TABLE VI

Party Distribution of Second Places in 'Hung' Contests, British General Election 1983

Second Party	Winning Party: Con.	Lab.	Lib.	SDP	Nat.	Other	Total
Con.		118	7	3	1		129
Lab.	102		3	2	1		108
Lib.	26)	11)					37)
	) 56	) 22					) 78
SDP	30)	11)					41)
Nat.	6	1					7
Other						12	12
Total	164	141	10	5	2	12	334

Source: Author's calculations from D. E. Butler and D. Kavanagh, The British General Election of 1983, London, 1984, pp. 305-28.

The evidence from Table VI suggests that in this respect the Conservatives would benefit more than Labour from a pact with the Alliance. Assuming that the 1983 figures represented the outcome of the initial count in an Alternative Vote election, an effective agreement between the Conservatives and the Alliance would benefit the Conservatives in three distinct ways. It would serve to a) 'rescue' the fifty-six Conservative hung seats in which the Alliance was second (and might otherwise capture with the aid of the second preferences of Labour voters); b) make possible the capture by the Conservatives of the 118 Labour hung seats in which the Conservatives were placed second; and c) prevent Labour using the second preferences of Alliance voters to capture the 102 Conservative hung seats in which Labour was second.

Such speculative calculations, however, depend ultimately on the third major variable that affects the operation of the Alternative Vote — the distribution of the second preferences of the eliminated party's supporters in each seat. Which party is best-placed in this respect?

Voters Second Preferences.

While it is impossible to predict precisely how electors would rank the parties in order of preference in a future British general election that was conducted under the Alternative Vote, there is some recent survey evidence of the second preferences of British party supporters. In the 1983 General Election Study voters were asked to name their second-choice party as well as their first choice. Specifically, they were asked: "If the voting paper had required you to give two votes, in order of preference, which Party would you have

put as your second choice?" The responses are summarised in Table VII.

Almost a fifth of respondents said either that they would not have indicated a second choice, or that they did not know what their second choice would have been. Minor-party voters were the most likely to name a second choice, and Labour voters were the least likely, but the party differences in this respect were not great. It cannot necessarily be assumed that in a British Alternative Vote election, this fifth of voters would choose to indicate no more than a first preference. Depending on the rules of operation that are adopted, it might be necessary (as in Australian federal elections) for the voter to indicate a full range of preferences for his ballot paper to be valid. In the Republic of Ireland, however, where the Alternative Vote is used for by-elections, the voter may indicate as few or as many preferences as he chooses, and approximately one-fifth normally do indicate only a first preference.[15]

Overall, the Alliance was the most frequent second choice of respondents in the 1983 General Election Study. Three-quarters of Conservative voters, well over half of Labour voters and over a third of other party voters declared that their second preference vote would have gone to the Alliance. There were no particularly marked regional variations in this pattern. Second preference support for the Alliance was somewhat lower than usual among Labour voters in Scotland, and among Conservative voters in the Midlands. Otherwise, the national pattern was repeated fairly closely in each region: Conservative voters overwhelmingly favoured the Alliance, while Labour and minor party voters were rather more ambivalent.

TABLE VII

British Voters' Second Preferences, 1983

First Preference	Second Preference (%) Con.	Lab.	Alliance	Others	None or DK
Conservative	-	5.2	75.6	1.4	17.8
Labour	13.4	-	59.0	6.9	20.2
Alliance	42.4	35.5	-	3.1	18.9
Others	19.6	28.3	37.0	-	15.2
Average	14.6	11.6	51.8	3.4	18.6

Source: British General Election Survey, 1983: response to question "If the voting paper had required you to give two votes, in order of preference, which party would you have put as your second choice?"

Alliance voters were more evenly divided over their second preferences than were Labour and Conservative voters, though rather more quoted the Conservatives as their second choice than quoted Labour. SDP voters were rather more favourably disposed towards the Conservatives than were the Liberals, but this intra-Alliance difference was not pronounced.

Assuming that, in an Alternative Vote election, the Alliance was in a position to form an agreement with either of the main parties to exchange second preferences, the evidence in Table VII suggests that a pact with the Conservatives would be more logical than a pact with Labour. More Alliance voters favoured the Conservatives than favoured Labour; the vast majority of Conservative voters saw the Alliance as their second choice; in addition to the fifth of Labour voters who were unwilling to indicate a second preference, another fifth favoured parties other than the Alliance. These considerations would seem to point to an exchange-of-preferences agreement between the Alliance and the Conservatives.

Clearly, however, on the basis of the evidence presented here, the Alliance's electoral strategists, would face a considerable dilemma in an Alternative Vote election. It was noted in the previous section that Conservatives invariably have far more minority MPs than any other party, and that in 1983 the Alliance was runner-up in appreciably more Conservative hung seats than Labour hung seats. A pact with Labour would seem to give the Alliance the greatest opportunity to capture additional seats - but the survey evidence suggests that in 1983 Labour voters would have been less inclined than Conservative voters to give their second preferences to the Alliance.

Also, it should be noted that the 1983 survey revealed some clear regional variations in Alliance voters' preferences. In Scotland and the north and south of England appreciably more Alliance voters favoured the Conservatives than favoured Labour. In Wales and the English midlands, on the other hand, most Alliance voters preferred Labour. Thus a national agreement between the Alliance and the Conservatives would mean, on the basis of the 1983 survey evidence, that in Wales and the midlands the Alliance was turning its back on the more obvious regional ally.

It remains doubtful, of course, whether the parties in an Alternative Vote election would seek to make agreements for the mutual exchange of second preferences, and if they did whether they would be able to 'deliver' their supporters' second preferences to each other. In an Alternative Vote election the 'delivery rate' of second preferences to an ally will depend on the effectiveness of a party's communications with its voters and on the willingness of the voters to comply with the party's instructions. Important in this will be the procedural question of whether or not the voter is obliged to indicate a full list of preferences for his vote to be valid. If the voter is free to indicate as few preferences as he wishes (as was proposed in the 1917 and 1931 attempts to introduce the Alternative Vote in Britain), the intentions of party strategists can be undermined if partisan voters insist on indicating only a first preference.

Under the Alternative Vote in Australia, on occasions when the allied Liberal and National parties do contest the same seats, they normally manage to deliver a very large proportion of second preferences to each other. In Australia, however, preferential voting has been in operation for over sixty years; the voter is

obliged to indicate a full list of preferences for his vote to be valid; the long-standing pact between the Liberal and National parties is based on ideological compatibility.

If the Alternative Vote was introduced in Britain none of these factors would necessarily apply. Initially at least, the voters would be unfamiliar with the tactics involved in preferential voting; the electoral rules might leave the voter free to indicate as few preferences as he wished; currently there is no 'natural' ideological affinity between the Alliance and either of the main parties.

One of the possible consequences of the introduction of the Alternative Vote, of course, is that the parties would attempt to make themselves attractive to each other's supporters in order to secure their second preferences. Given softer party attitudes, and with 'moderates' in command, one or other of the two main parties might be amenable to an electoral understanding with the Alliance.

Certainly, in the 1900s the Alternative Vote was advocated specifically as a device to help the Liberals and the emerging Labour Party to cooperate with each other in order to avoid the division or the anti-Conservative vote. In the future, Labour and the Alliance might be reconciled, and an anti-Conservative pact be forthcoming. That is hardly imminent, however, and indeed in 1983 the Alliance had more second-preference support among Conservative voters than among Labour voters.

On current form the ideological distance between all three parties would be likely to prejudice any attempts to achieve inter-party cooperation in the exchange of second preferences. Further,

although the relatively even division of the Alliance's second preferences between the two main parties suggests that the Alliance could form a pact with either party, that very ambivalance might make it difficult for the Alliance to convince either party that it would be a sound ally. Given that, the Alliance might be tempted (or might be obliged) to avoid a formal agreement with any party and seek to attract a wide range of second preferences by being 'all things to all parties'. Clearly, however, that tactic carries its own risks.

Conclusions

Any conclusions that are drawn from the evidence examined in this paper must inevitably be tentative. In an election fought under the Alternative Vote the voters would not necessarily behave in the way they did in 1983. Regardless of that factor, it cannot be assumed that the distribution of second places that emerged in 1983, or the 1983 pattern of voters' second preferences, would necessarily be repeated in any future election (especially in face of the increased electoral volatitility of recent years). Even on the basis of the 1983 evidence, the impact of the Nationalists and 'others' has not been taken into account in the above discussions. The pattern of gains and losses under the Alternative Vote would be likely to be very different in England than in Scotland and Wales, where the four-party system produces a potentially more complicated pattern of preferences.

While recognising these qualifications, some general points can be made. It was pointed out earlier in the paper that the Alternative Vote offers the greatest rewards to the party that (a) wins all, or the bulk, of its seats with an overall majority; (b) is runner-up in the greatest number of hung contests; and (c) attracts most of the

other parties' second preferences. From the evidence examined above it is clear that none of the parties enjoys all three of these advantages.

Until 1983 Labour would have had least to fear from the Alternative Vote. In post-war elections Labour invariably had the largest number of majority MPs and had a lot of Conservative minority MPs at which to aim. In 1983, however, Labour had almost as many minority MPs as the Conservatives, was placed second in fewer seats than the Conservatives and was somewhat less attractive to Alliance voters than were the Conservatives.

The Conservatives would seem to have the most to gain and the most to lose from the introduction of the Alternative Vote. In 1983 as in every election since 1918, the Conservatives had the greatest number of minority MPs. At the same time, the Conservatives in 1983 were placed second in more hung contests than any other party and thus had the greatest opportunity to increase their representation. What is more, on the basis of the 1983 survey evidence, the Conservatives could prove to be an attractive ally for the Alliance, as Conservative voters were more inclined than Labour voters to quote the Alliance as their second preference.

The Alternative Vote could offer a great deal to the Alliance. The elimination of the 'wasted vote' factor could increase the Alliance's total vote. The Alliance could exert influence over one or other of the main parties through the 'sale' of its supporters second preferences. Disputes within the Alliance over which partner should contest particular seats could be settled by Liberal and SDP candidates running in tandem. Some of the objectives that are sought

by the Alliance through proportional representation could be achieved through the Alternative Vote.

The fact that the Alliance was the second choice of most voters in 1983 suggests that it would also have the opportunity to increase its share of seats. In 1983, however, the Alliance was runner-up in a smaller number of hung contests than either of the main parties. An effective mutual exchange of second preferences between the Alliance and either of the main parties would enable the Alliance to capture some hung seats but it would allow its partner to capture even more.

Perhaps the main point to emerge from this paper, however, is that for all the parties the introduction of the Alternative Vote would involve very high stakes. Had the Alternative Vote been introduced in 1918 or 1930 (as was so nearly the case), its impact would have been limited. Compared with today there were fewer candidates, fewer hung contests and a less complex party system. Thus commenting on the effect that the Alternative Vote might have had in the 1923-59 period, David Butler concluded that: [16]

> "...the Alternative Vote would in no case have changed a decisive result into an indecisive one. In some cases the majority would have been reduced but it would have remained adequate."

Now, however, the situation is much more open. The increase in the number of minority MPs in recent elections means that the introduction of the Alternative Vote would be more of a gamble for all the parties than would have been the case in the past. Two-thirds of Labour and Alliance MPs, and two-fifths of Conservatives, lacked an overall majority in 1983, and thus would have been at risk in an

Alternative Vote election. Equally, each party was placed second in a significant number of hung contests and was therefore in a position to increase its representation considerably. With (as in 1983) 164 Conservative and 141 Labour hung seats, the outcome of the election could be determined by the distribution of second preferences.

For each party, then, the consequences of the introduction of the Alternative Vote could be considerable but un-predictable. Uncertainty produced by the sheer number of hung contests in recent elections is compounded by doubts about whether the Alliance would wish, or be able, to form an agreement with one of the other parties, and whether allies would be able to deliver second preferences to each other even if an electoral pact was made. If the Alternative Vote was to be introduced in just some constituencies (perhaps in rural seats in combination with the Single Transferable Vote in urban seats), the uncertainties would be all the greater. This unpredictability might reduce the chances of the parties being prepared to accept the Alternative Vote as a compromise reform. Nevertheless, precisely because the consequences of the Alternative Vote are so uncertain, while the chances of its adoption remain real, greater attention should be given to the nature and possible effects of the system than has been the case in the recent past.

FOOTNOTES

*This paper emerges from a study of the operation of the Alternative Vote in Australia, Canada and the Republic of Ireland. I am grateful to the Australian Studies Centre, the Carnegie Foundation, the British Academy and the University of Strathclyde for contributing to the costs of the study.

1. Here and throughout the paper the term 'overall majority' is used to describe the situation in which a candidate receives more than half the votes. The term 'simple majority' is used to describe the situation in which a candidate receives more votes than any other single candidate but less than all the other candidates combined. For consistency the term 'absolute majority' (which is a valid alternative to 'overall majority') is avoided, as is the American use of the terms 'majority' (to mean an 'overall majority') and 'plurality' (to mean a 'simple majority'). Also avoided is the now largely obsolete term 'plurity', to mean a 'simple majority'. For a discussion of the use of these terms see H. H. Fowler Modern English Usage, O.U.P. London, 1965.

2. For the electoral reform issue see V. Bogdanor and D. Butler Democracy and Elections, London 1983; V. Bogdanor, What is Proportional Representation?, London 1984; E. Lakeman, Power to Elect, London, 1982.

3. For details see D. Butler, The Electoral System in Britain since 1918, London 1963; V. Bogdanor, The People and the Party System, London, 1981; M. Pugh, Electoral Reform in War and Peace 1906-18, London 1978; M. Pugh, 'Political Parties and the Campaign for Proportional Representation 1905-14; Parliamentary Affairs 1980, pp. 294-307; J. D. Fair, 'The Second Labour Government and Electoral REform 1929-31', Albion, 1981, pp. 276-310.

4. Lakeman, Power to Elect, p. 14.

5. For statements of the case against proportional representation see P. Hain, Proportional Mis-representation, London 1986; J. A. Chandler, 'The Plurality Vote: a Reappraisal', Political Studies, 1982, pp. 87-94.

6. See V. Bogdanor and D. Butler, Democracy and Elections, London 1983, p. 3.

7. For an expression of MPs' opinions see K. R. Gladdish (et al.). MPs' Perceptions of the British Electoral System, Reading Politics Group Research Paper No. 1, University of Reading, 1984.

8. Conference on Electoral Reform: Letter From Mr. Speaker to the Prime Minister, Cd. 8463.

9. See Pugh, Electoral Reform in War and Peace 1906-18 for details of the Bill's passage.

10. Preferential (or ordinal) voting requires the elector to list the candidates in order of preference, whereas categorical (or spot) voting requires the elector to indicate only a single choice.

11. See R. M. Punnett, The Alternative Vote with the Optional Use of Preferences: Some Irish Lessons for Britain and Australia, Strathclyde Papers on Government and Politics, No. 43, University of Strathclyde, 1986.

12. For a guide to the literature on the operation of the Alternative Vote in Australia see M. Goot 'Electoral Systems' in Don Aitkin (ed.) Surveys of Australian Political Science, Sydney 1985, pp. 179-264.

13. See J. Curtice and M. Steed, 'Turning Dreams Into Reality', Parliamentary Affairs, 1983, pp. 166-82.

14. See particularly S. E. Finer, Adversary Politics and Electoral Reform, London, 1975.

15. See Punnett, The Alternative Vote with the Optional Use of Preferences, p. 29.

16. Butler, The Electoral System in Britain Since 1918, p. 193.