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Common Error No. 25 [1]

Written by **Dr Madsen Pirie** [2] | Monday 4 February 2008

25. "Proportional representation is fairer than our present electoral system which can give power to minorities."

The argument for proportional representation is that it represents parties in the legislature in proportion to their support in the country, whereas a first-past-the-post system tends to squeeze out smaller parties and often results in a government which has less than 50 percent of popular support.

After listening to the theoretical arguments for proportional representation, look at the practical experience of it. It is under PR that minorities often achieve disproportionate power. PR tends to deny overall majorities, and to promote representation by smaller parties. Coalitions are the norm, with very small parties bargaining for their demands in return for support.

Proportional representation thus brings in the politics of what used to be called the smoke-filled room, of the deals struck in private between the political bosses. The first-past-the-post system may often bring to power parties with less than 50 percent of the popular vote. What it does not do is to give excessive power to very small parties. One has only to look at the disproportionate influence of the extreme orthodox parties in Israel. With only 2 or 3 seats they have exercised a major influence because their votes were needed to build coalitions. It's possible to have a 10 percent shift in opinion in Scandinavia, and see only some junior agriculture minister swapped for someone from another party.

A democracy should enable people to change their government. It is more about throwing out who they don't want than about electing the most popular. Proportional representation makes change difficult.

Elections tend to bring small adjustments in the balance between the parties, and to result in coalitions of slightly different composition. There are times when a break from the status quo is needed. It happened in Britain in 1945 and in 1979, but it is doubtful that either would have happened under proportional representation.

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