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PR: The risk of a hung parliament [1]

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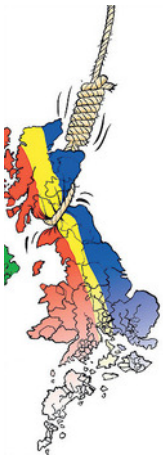

According to the bookies, a hung parliament is now the most likely outcome of the election, with the Liberal Democrats playing the kingmakers in deciding whether the Conservatives or Labour would make up the next government. A hung parliament would indeed be tremendously damaging: the next government would be too weak to implement reform and may be thrall to fringe parties. But the biggest danger would be the Liberal Democrats? price for coalition ? the introduction of proportional representation (PR).

PR has the virtue of being fairer than first-past-the-post, by allowing a number of representatives to be elected from each constituency, and it gives smaller parties a much bigger chance of succeeding. This is a good thing, but the drawbacks of PR aren?t worth this added fairness.

As an Irish citizen, I am no stranger to the PR system. Proportional representation means that poll shifts have to be massive in order to bring about political change. As a result, in Ireland, governments change according to backroom deals between political parties. In the 1990s, the Labour party managed to change coalitions from the two main centre-right parties, changing not only prime ministers without an election, but the main ruling party. Currently, the government coalition includes the Green Party, and it seems highly likely that the Greens would be a part of any future government formed by the opposition parties. This has meant that fringe green policies like carbon taxes have been implemented without popular support.

Radical reform is also very difficult under PR, as governments cannot take risks that would offend their minor coalition partners. For instance, the Irish government has been limited in the extent of public spending cuts it can make, for fear of upsetting the Green Party, despite a deficit to rival Greece or Britain. Much has been made recently of the instability and weakness of a hung parliament ? bringing in PR would mean that every parliament is a hung parliament.

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