

Britain & the Proportional Representation question - a lesson from Ireland, 1920

By Mark Duncan

Doubtless Boris Johnson let loose a harrumph of relief at the news of it.

When Nigel Farage announced in advance of December's UK election that his Brexit Party would not contest for seats then held by the Conservatives it spared the British PM a possible splintering of his party's Brexit-supporting vote in no less than 317 constituencies - a far more extensive arrangement than the Remain-styled pact struck by the Liberal Democrats, Greens and Plaid Cymru that reached across just 60 constituencies in England and Wales.¹

The effect of the Brexit Party's stance may not have been a decisive factor, but it certainly contributed to Johnson's return to Number 10 with the kind of parliamentary manoeuvrability that had eluded his predecessor.

Johnson's 39-seat majority was nevertheless achieved with a mere 43.6% of all votes cast. This was only marginally better than his Conservative Party's 2017 performance (it's vote share increased by only 1.2%), but sufficient to allow the incoming administration to prescribe the hardest of Brexits upon an electorate, the majority of whom voted for parties - most notably Labour, Liberal Democrats and the SNP - that favoured either a second referendum on Brexit or its cancellation altogether.²

This chasm between voter preference and political outcome is nothing new. It is an all too common by-product of a first past the post (FPTP) electoral system that inclines to reduce politics to binary choices, to squeeze out minority political viewpoints and to deliver parliamentary representation that is anything but representative.

The British attachment to single member constituencies, or FPTP, is of course deeply rooted in tradition, in the self-interest of the two dominant parties, and in the sheer simplicity of a system that demands as little as possible of the voters who go to the polls

¹ Andy Gregory, General Election: Lib Dems agree 'Remain alliance' with Greens and Plaid Cymru. 7 November 2019 Accessible online at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/general-election-liberal-democrats-green-plaid-cymru-unite-to-remain-alliance-swinson-a9188606.html>

² For a full list of party seats and vote share in the 2019 UK election, see BBC online, UK results: Conservatives win majority' <https://www.bbc.com/news/election/2019/results>

- strike an X on the ballot paper beside your candidate of choice and the person with the most Xs to his or her name wins the seat. Crude, yes, but as uncomplicated and easy to understand as an electoral system comes.

It is the unfussiness of FPTP and its tendency to produce clear-cut choices and stable, single party governments that lies at heart of the historic British attachment to it. And yet, when circumstances have determined it and the stakes have been considered of lesser consequence to the principal parties of power, British legislators have not been afraid to experiment with, let's just say, 'alternative arrangements'.

As it happened, the recent Westminster elections occurred almost a century to the month when large numbers of Irish voters went to the polls to cast their vote in an election that involved the first major demonstration of a system known as Proportional Representation (PR) in what then constituted the UK.

Unlike FPTP, a PR election involved multi-seat constituencies and allowed for votes to be cast, preferentially, for more than a single candidate.

The Irish Municipal elections of January 1920 therefore provided an important 'practical test' of a system that had been subject intermittent debate in the UK over the previous four decades.³

Campaigning groups like the London-based Proportional Representation Society had been arguing for its application in UK parliamentary elections since the mid 1880s and, indeed, its partial adoption in place of FPTP had been recommended by a cross-party Speaker's Conference held in 1916-17 as the First World War still raged.⁴ While another recommendation of that Conference, votes for women, was endorsed by the Westminster parliament, PR was not.⁵ It fell to a free vote of members, one of whom, Sir Philip Magnus, MP for London University, felt it 'far too revolutionary to be introduced at the present time.'⁶

³ Cork Examiner, 19 January 1920. The embrace of FPTP had led to the establishment of Proportional Representation Society in London in 1884 - see <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/who-we-are/our-history/>

⁴ Parliamentary Archives, LG/F/166/5/. Accessible online at https://www.parliament.uk/documents/parliamentary-archives/LG_F_166_5_1.pdf

⁵ David Klemperer, *Electoral Systems and Electoral Reform in the UK in Historical Perspective* (2019) Accessible online at <https://consoc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/David-Klemperer-Electoral-Systems-and-Electoral-Reform-in-the-UK-in-Historical-Perspective.pdf>

⁶ See discussion of Franchise and electoral reform, Hansard, HC Deb 28 March 1917 vol 92 cc524-70 <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1917/mar/28/franchise-and-electoral-reform-1>

Not too revolutionary for revolutionary Ireland, mind.

As was the case with other matters, when it came to electoral reform, Irish exceptionalism in the UK context was readily conceded.

A partial form of PR had been envisaged as part of the ill-fated 3rd home rule bill introduced by Herbert Asquith's Liberal government in 1912 and it had been trialled in Trinity College during the 1918 Westminster election and again during a one-off election to Sligo Corporation in January 1919 when it was deployed in response to a specific set of local circumstances that concerned issues of governance and the raising of public finances.⁷

The experience of Sligo was nevertheless significant: it was widely trumpeted as a triumph of PR and helped accelerate its extension to all Irish local elections when the House of Commons comfortably passed the Local Government (Ireland) Bill, 1919.⁸

This legislation was not without its Irish critics.

Sir Edward Carson, the Ulster unionist leader and MP for Belfast Duncairn, rubbished the PR proposal on the grounds that the system was too hard to understand, that Irish representatives had not been consulted on it and that it marked an unwanted regulatory divergence between the two neighbouring islands. 'We do not want in Ireland this change that you have refused to have in England', Carson told the House of Commons.⁹ Speaking in the same chamber in the same debate, another Ulster unionist contributor, Major O'Neill, declared that what he objected to was Ireland being 'made the subject of an experiment.'¹⁰

⁷ See *Patrick Deignan*, PR & the Sligo borough election of 1919, in *History Ireland*, May-June 2009. Accessible online at <https://www.historyireland.com/20th-century-contemporary-history/pr-the-sligo-borough-election-of-1919/>. From the same author, read 'Sligo Protestants and the Borough Election of January 1919', *Sligo Independent*, 10 June 2009 <https://www.independent.ie/regionals/sligochampion/localnotes/sligo-protestants-and-the-borough-election-of-january-1919-27564871.html>

⁸ The Bill was passed by 170 votes to 27. *Irish Times*, 25 March 1920. For Irish press reaction to the use of PR in Sligo in 1919, see John Mackie, *Proportional Representation and the Irish Free State*, a paper read before the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland on Thursday, 27th January, 1927. Accessible online at http://www.tara.tcd.ie/bitstream/handle/2262/4364/jssisiVolXiv311_329.pdf;jsessionid=076310DCAD7DEA92CCF5CF5119CA9EB7?sequence=1

⁹ Hansard debates, HC Deb 24 March 1919 vol 114 cc99-18399. Accessible online at <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1919/mar/24/local-government-ireland-bill>.

¹⁰ *Cork Examiner*, 25 March 1919

Experiment it was, but its principal purpose was barely concealed. It was to scupper the electoral rise of Sinn Féin, which had swept up the vast majority of Irish seats under the FPTP system in the historic Westminster election of December 1918.

Although Sinn Féin understood fully that this was its principal purpose, the party was at one with moderate nationalists and southern unionists in favouring the introduction of a PR system using a single transferable vote method.

What reservations Republicans expressed had less to do with the system than its implementation. They complained that new local constituency boundaries had been introduced to thwart them and that no money had been spent and no effort expended in explaining to voters how the new PR system worked - and with the war of independence gathering momentum, there were complaints, too, that Sinn Féin campaigners and candidates were targets of police and military intimidation and worse.¹¹

Ultimately, it fell to the political parties themselves, to the Proportional Representation Society of Ireland (founded in 1911), and to the Press to educate prospective voters on how the system operated and how they might best exercise their franchise.

On the eve of polling day, for instance, the *Irish Independent* published some 'Important Hints for Tomorrow', which advised electors on the Do's and Don'ts around correctly completing a PR ballot paper.¹² The Do's included putting the figure "1" beside the candidate you liked best, "2" beside the candidate you liked second best and continuing your preferences all the way down the ballot paper. The Don'ts included voting with an X and putting the figure "1" beside more than one candidate.¹³

These efforts clearly had the desired effect.

Contrary to claims that PR elections were too complex for many voters to understand, this first major experiment with PR returned relatively few spoiled ballot papers.

¹¹ See, for example, *Irish Bulletin*, 14 January 1920 and 19 January 1920

¹² *Irish Independent*, 14 January 1920

¹³ On polling day itself, the *Irish Times* reported on a 'novel features' of the voting which saw the illiterate electors facilitated by count centre staff. The list of candidates was read out to them by the presiding officer and they were asked to whom they wished to give their preference. See *Irish Times*, 16 January 1920

Of the 331,503 votes that were cast across about 127 Irish municipalities in January 1920, just over nine thousand of them were spoiled - a number deemed 'virtually negligible' at the time.¹⁴ One newspaper, the *Evening Telegraph*, remarked that the experience with PR had shown that it did not 'tax too severely the intellectual energies of the voters or the officials.'¹⁵

As for the outcome of the Municipal elections, Sinn Féin emerged again as the largest Irish party, but there was no sweeping aside of its opposition as had happened in the previous Westminster election. The results of the first PR election reveal a more complex Irish reality than that revealed in 1918. Here, the system provided for representation to Republicans, Unionists, nationalists, labour and independents; it allowed for minorities to win representations in parts of the country where they had been traditionally excluded: Sinn Féiners seized seats in what were previously considered Unionist strongholds in Ulster (most notably in Derry where Nationalists won majority representation for the first time in history) and Unionists did the same in Nationalist and Republican heartlands in the south.¹⁶

Looking on from London, *The Times* newspaper remarked that the new electoral system had proven its 'efficiency in securing the representation of minorities.'¹⁷

Long-term, of course, those Municipal elections helped establish a system of voting that would become the basis of democratic politics in the independent state that emerged from the revolutionary decade. But there and then, in the immediate aftermath of the Municipal elections, the message that emerged from the first major PR experience in these islands was that lessons needed to be learned in London by the British political establishment.

¹⁴ Conor McCabe, The Irish Labour Party and the 1920 local elections, *Saothar*, Vol. 35 (2010), p. 16. See also Irish Times, 19 January 1920

¹⁵ Quoted in Frederic A. Ogg, Proportional Representation in Ireland, *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (May, 1920), pp. 323-324

¹⁶ According to the Proportional Representation Society of Ireland, the distribution of seats in the Municipal elections was Sinn Féin 550; Unionists 355; Nationalist Party 238; the Reform Party 108; independents 161; and Labour 394. See McCabe, *Saorthar*, op cit. It is notable, too, that in Derry City the Proportional representation scheme returned a majority Nationalist representation to the City Council for the first time in its history' - it has theretofore been a 'Unionist stronghold'.

¹⁷ Quoted in Irish Independent, 20 January 1920

From the unionist (as it was then) *Irish Times* to the underground republican government's own *Irish Bulletin*, there was agreement on that.

For his part, Arthur Griffith MP, founder of Sinn Féin and long-time proponent of PR, delighted in the opportunity to challenge the British to embrace a system they had been all too happy to impose upon Ireland.¹⁸

'Let us see whether the English Coalition Government will now apply proportional representation to its own land. England is an oligarchy, and oligarchs don't like Proportional Representation. They thought it might help them in Ireland. But they will resist applying it to England.'¹⁹

The resistance of which Griffith spoke remains - at least as far as parliamentary elections go - but it is weakening under pressure from Brexit and the mounting realisation that, perhaps, in a deeply divided society, a winner takes all voting system contributes less to the resolution of difficult political issues than to the sidelining of minority views and the furthering of intensely-felt resentments.

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¹⁸ Griffith hated the FPTP system and believed that PR 'must appeal to every one who believes in real freedom' (Sinn Féin, 2 May 1908). Quoted in Michael Laffan, 'Griffith, Arthur', Dictionary of Irish Biography. Accessible online at http://centenaries.ucd.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Griffith-Arthur_Joseph.pdf

¹⁹ Irish Bulletin, 20 January 1920