

# Reclaiming The Body Politic: The Roots of Polarisation

In the previous part of this series, I suggested that the inclusion of a 'Jury's Choice' option on ballot papers would significantly improve the electoral system and might reduce the dominant role of political parties – and would probably lead to more stable government, with less of the destabilising swinging between extremes, every few years, which is such a prominent feature of party-dominated politics.

The deficiencies of the electoral system are not the root causes of those swings, however, and deeper reforms will almost certainly be needed to banish them entirely. To get an idea of what reforms might be needed, we need to understand why those swings happen.

At the heart of it, in my view, are fundamental polarities in some of the functions of government, and in the way people view their relationship with the state – polarities which are not properly represented in the structure of our institutions.

The core polarity lies in the ever-present tension within political life between the need for consolidation and security, and the impulse for expansion and betterment. This is compounded by the fact that people view government from diametrically opposed positions: some people emphasise individual responsibility and collective rights, while others emphasise collective responsibility and individual rights. Those different perspectives lead to very different views on how government should operate, but both are important and a mature society should look for ways in which both could be integrated into the political infrastructure.

The need for this can be seen in the fact that left and right parties clearly favour different areas of policy and, generally, the public seems to consistently prefer the right's approach on 'conservative' issues, such as law and order, defence, industry etc, and consistently prefer the left's approach on 'progressive' issues like the health service, education, welfare etc. When the country lurches from a Labour government to a Tory one, or vice versa, it's not usually because there's been a major shift in public opinion on policy; what changes is which areas of policy the public regards as most important.

The polarity is only present in some of the functions of government, perhaps 25% or so, but it tends to determine which party gains power. Hardcore party members are often wedded to particular positions about that small percentage of issues, and they're the ones prospective MPs have to satisfy in order to be nominated. Those issues therefore skew policy on everything else because, under the current system, the only way for a party to get control on the issues they are so concerned about is for them to get control of everything else as well.

For the most part, while those different policy areas compete with each other for resources, they don't actively conflict with each other – so there's actually no need for the same people to have control of them. And it's quite possible that the management and effective oversight of the different areas really call for different qualities and different basic perspectives.

## **Towards mature governance**

We are currently a long way from having a system of government fit for a mature society and, from where we are now, many desirable reforms seem impossible to bring about. Unless we have a vision of where we want to end up, however, we can't be confident that any step will take us in the right direction. The reform I outline below is almost certainly too radical to be worth campaigning for at present but, unless we appreciate the possibility, we can't make sensible choices about what kind of electoral reform to pursue.

How can we hope for a system which is both stable and properly representative if the process for choosing leaders and representatives lumps all those functions of government together? If effective management of those polarised areas calls for different qualities, the public can only be adequately represented if legislative responsibility for those different areas of government is split between two different bodies.

Although Britain does already have a bicameral Parliament, with upper and lower houses, the two chambers both currently oversee the full spectrum of government activity, with the upper house merely moderating the lower. This is primarily the result of haphazard historical development, however, and there's no reason to assume that this is the most effective way of structuring a governing body. A Parliament comprising separate left and right houses, each having primary oversight over different areas of government, could be far more appropriate both in terms of its effectiveness as a legislature, and in terms of how well it represents the views of the electorate.

In that scenario, the two houses would have different areas of primary responsibility and each constituency would therefore have two elected representatives – each representing different spheres of political need. Splitting the responsibilities of government in this way would allow it to function in a more balanced way, and would also offer voters more flexibility in how they express their will.

The two polarised chambers could perhaps moderate each other's legislation, much as the Lords does currently for the Commons, with the secondary chamber being able to propose amendments but not, ultimately, being able to block anything the primary chamber was determined on. Both chambers would have full democratic legitimacy but, since both would have clear mandates in their different spheres, neither would feel inferior.

For those aspects of government which don't fall naturally into either camp, a neutral configuration of upper and lower chambers could be readily derived from the same set of electoral choices. Since each constituency would have two MPs, the one with the greater majority could sit in the primary chamber, with the other sitting in the secondary chamber. In this case, they would be more nearly equal, so it would not be appropriate for the primary chamber to be supreme. But this is unlikely to be a serious problem, for two reasons: firstly, because issues likely to generate intense disagreement will generally fall into the domain of the polarised houses; and secondly, because the political make-up of the neutral chambers will tend to be much more evenly balanced than we are used to in the current system.

Many people will regard this proposal as too big a change to have any chance of being implemented, given the current political establishment. But, as I suggested above, unless we appreciate how a mature system would operate – what kind of system we want to end up with – we can't make sensible choices about what kind of reforms to pursue, and what kind of strategy is most

likely to achieve them. And the history of democracy shows that reforms can move surprisingly quickly from being unthinkable to being inevitable.

Many reformers regard proportional representation as a self-evidently worthwhile reform, and argue that it will open the way to further worthwhile changes. I think both of these views are suspect. The first assumes that political parties are intrinsically important rather than a feature of current circumstances. The second overlooks the fact that entrenching the party system could increase resistance to desirable reforms which might, as a side-effect, diminish the role of parties.

Like proportional representation, the proposal I've outlined above involves constituencies having more than one representative and will almost certainly lead to a better spread of representation. But this reform focuses on enhancing individual voters' ability to express their will – which is surely the core purpose of an electoral system – rather than matching seats to political parties' share of the total vote (which risks subordinating voters' interests to party interests).

The two types of reform are not mutually exclusive, however, though practical constraints (the number of MPs and size of constituencies) limit the scope for combining them – if geographical representation is important. That's something we can't properly assess without exploring the relationship between local and central representation, and the relationship between executive and representative arms of government. In my next article I argue that those are both factors which are highly unsatisfactory in the current system, and healthy reform in those areas is likely to further reduce the importance of political parties.

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