

Guest Lecture: Professor Vernon Bogdanor CBE
“The General Election”

Monday, 10 May 2010

Middle Temple Hall

Master Treasurer: “To give a talk to us on the 10th of May, I had hoped there would be an election on the 6th of May because the date had been leaked by the Secretary of State for Defence and I hoped it would be interesting if there was a hung Parliament. Well, not only do we have a hung Parliament, but we also have a situation of great uncertainty which is moving from minute to minute and from hour to hour. I have just heard that Gordon Brown is laying down his career for the sake of his country, but it is a situation in which we are keener than ever to hear from Professor Bogdanor. He needs now no introduction because he has been on BBC television on Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday and he will be on television later this evening so you may rush to your television sets if you are not joining us for dinner after his talk to see if he tells the BBC what he tells us. Master Bogdanor, thank you very much for coming; we are looking forward immensely to you enlightening us.”

Professor Bogdanor: “I think that my coming shows my naivety as a non-lawyer for being seduced by Lord Justice Burnton. One is really talking about a moving picture and of course it is possible that everything I say is being refuted while I am saying it. I think that, very typically for a senior judge, Master Treasurer has put me in an embarrassing position. As Aneurin Bevan used to say, “Why look at the crystal ball when you can read the book?” I will try to look at the basic facts.

Perhaps it is worth comparing this election with one which was held nearly 60 years ago in 1951. In that election the turnout was 82% compared to a 65 % turnout in the 2010 election, which many people thought was quite high. Of those voting, 97% voted for the Conservative and Labour parties. The Liberals put up 109 candidates and just 6 Liberal MPs were returned. The Liberals gained 2½ % of the vote and there were just 9 MPs in Parliament who did not belong to the Conservative or Labour Parties. All the Parties were UK-wide parties. There were no nationalist parties and almost all of the Northern Ireland seats were won by Ulster Unionists who were at that time allied to, and in effect part of the Conservative Party.

Compare that with the election last week. Just 67% voted for the Conservative and Labour Parties; this is the lowest figure for the two major parties since 1918. There are 85 members of Parliament who are neither Labour nor Conservative. In Northern Ireland, there are no MPs who are part of the British party system at all. The Conservatives tried to form an alliance, or rather resurrect an old alliance, with the Unionists, but this failed and indeed the leader of the Conservative Unionists, Sir Reg Empey, was defeated by a Democratic Unionist. The battle in Northern Ireland was not, by contrast with 1951, between parties seeking to form the government of the United Kingdom, but part of a province-wide communal battle between the Unionists and the Nationalists.

In 1951, the Liberals, the predecessor party to the Liberal Democrats, gained 2½% of the vote. In 1951, they won 23%. In addition, 13% voted for other parties, one in eight and that is a post-war record by far; it was 10% last time. In the Euro Elections held just after the expenses scandal, 40% voted for parties other than the big three.

With 85 members of Parliament from parties other than the Conservative or Labour, any party hoping to secure a working majority needs to be at least 90 seats ahead of its main opponent. That has happened in 7 out of the 16 General Elections since the war so you can see that a hung Parliament is not wholly an aberration. Had there been 85 MPs from third parties in Parliament in 1951, Churchill would not have had an overall majority, Edward Heath would not have had an overall majority in 1970, while in 1979 Margaret Thatcher also would not have had an overall majority.

The victorious Conservatives, by contrast with 1951, are almost wholly an English party. In 1955 the Conservatives had a majority not only of seats in Scotland but also of votes. They are the only party to have achieved this since the war. But in 2010, they won just one seat in Scotland. They are in fact the fourth party in terms of seats and voting strength in Scotland. They have eight seats in Wales and none in Northern Ireland, so all but 9 of their 307 seats are English seats.

What is the main cause of these changes? I would speculate that it results from the break-up of the large socio-economic and religious blocks which dominated Britain 60 years ago, but now no longer exist outside Northern Ireland. The class and

occupational basis which determined voting behaviour is no longer there. The tribal basis of voting behaviour is no longer there, people no longer say “we have always been Labour” or “we have always voted Conservative”.

There is a lot of talk in Britain about apathy in politics, a decline in party membership and so on, but these are trends common to many western or European democracies. Our debate can sometimes be a rather parochial one. The same socio-economic trends are evident in many western countries.

In Britain in the 1950s one in eleven of us belonged to a political party, now less than one in eight of us do. Party membership has been greatly declining. We are a more fluid country and also a geographically fragmented country - and we had a very geographically-fragmented election. For example, in the southwest of England, the electoral battle was between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats and Labour was very much the third party. In Scotland the electoral battle was mainly between Labour and the Scottish Nationalists with the Conservatives out of the battle and the Liberals very much a third party. You may perhaps think that, with these changes, the party structure suited to an earlier period is not so suited to today's new circumstances. Perhaps indeed the day of the mass political party is over and perhaps the electoral system that sustained such a party system is also no longer relevant. But that of course is speculation.

The election shows to me what a conservative country Britain is: it occurred at the end of a Parliament which had seen two major crises. First, there was the economic crisis, the crisis in the financial markets and second, the expenses crisis, a political crisis which seemed to undermine respect for members of Parliament. Many believed that there would be very radical reactions, that either people would not vote on the grounds that all MPs were rascals or that they would support new and extremist parties or perhaps that there would be a surge in support for the Liberal Democrats as they seemed to some to be less tainted by the expenses scandal. But in fact none of these things happened.

The election was an unusual one since all parties had reason to be disappointed by the result - the Labour Party most obviously, since it lost the election. The Liberal

Democrats failed to achieve the gains they had hoped or to make a breakthrough, while the Conservatives who for most of last year were 40% in the polls compared to Labour's 30%, and therefore on course for an overall majority, failed to achieve a majority despite facing a very unpopular Government and a Prime Minister who had presided over a recession.

If we look at the result, we can see that 306 Conservatives were returned and there will be certainly one more in the Thirsk and Malton constituency where voting is delayed. Those 306 MPs were elected on 36% of the vote. That is the lowest Conservative vote since the war except for the elections of October 1974, 1997, 2001, 2005, all of which the Conservatives lost. In 1945 when the Conservatives were so comprehensively defeated by Mr Attlee, they gained 40% of the vote, 4% more than they did in 2010. The Conservative vote is lower than it was at the time of the last hung Parliament in February 1974 when Edward Heath secured 38% of the vote.

The Labour Party secured 258 seats on 29% of the vote and that, apart from 1983, was the lowest percentage of votes it had ever secured as a mass party since 1918. The Liberal Democrats gained 1% of the vote from last time, 23% per cent of the vote which gave them 57 seats.

One can see why the Liberal Democrats are upset by the electoral system since nearly a quarter of the vote gave them less than 10% of the seats. One can put the point another way by saying that it took 33,000 votes to elect a Labour MP; 35,000 votes to elect a Conservative MP; but 119,000 votes to elect a Liberal Democrat MP. The Liberal Democrats, however, were not the only party to be disadvantaged by the electoral system. The fourth party in terms of votes in the election was the United Kingdom Independence Party which gained over 900,000 votes, 3% of the vote, and 400,000 votes more than in 2005. In a proportional system, they would have won around 20 seats. But they won no seats at all.

Nevertheless, UKIP was not without influence in the election because if one assumes that the bulk of its voters would otherwise have supported the Conservatives, they cost the Conservatives at least 10 seats including the seat of Ed Balls at Morley and Outwood, the seat that Annunziata Rees-Mogg, who David Cameron wanted to

rename Nancy Mogg, contested in Somerton and Frome, and ironically the seat in Wells of the Euro-sceptic Conservative MP, David Heathcote-Amory.

There was also a fifth party that was strikingly under represented and that was the British National Party. I expect that everyone here cheered heartily when Nick Griffin was defeated in Barking. None of us noticed that the BNP increased its vote by 1% to get nearly 2% of the vote. Half a million people voted for the British National Party. Admittedly, the number of BNP candidates increased threefold since the last election and their vote per candidate increased only slightly. Nevertheless, we have to face the fact that nearly two in every hundred of our countrymen and women who voted, supported a Neo-Fascist party. Those, like myself, who support proportional representation, have to confront the fact, that under PR, the BNP would have won around 12 or 13 seats.

There were seven parties with lower votes than UKIP or the BNP which did secure representation in government: the Democratic Unionist Party in Northern Ireland, the Scottish Nationalists, Sinn Fein, Plaid Cymru, the SDLP in Northern Ireland, the Greens and the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland.

I have given you the percentage vote in the election which was Conservative 36, Labour 29, Liberal Democrats 23. I would now like to give you the figures of the election in 2005. They were Labour 36, Conservatives 33, Liberal Democrats 22. You will see that the gap between the two major parties was much less than in 2010, yet the election of 2005 did not yield a hung Parliament, but a comfortable Labour majority of 67. Had the result in 2010 been the other way around: Labour 36, Conservatives 29, Liberal Democrats 23, Labour would have had a very comfortable majority perhaps near to 100. It is very difficult to explain to people from abroad why it is that the Conservatives need to be 10% ahead to secure an overall majority. It is ironic because the Conservatives are of course the only defenders of the first past the post voting system. It does show what an important part principle plays in politics because of course their self-interest goes much against that system. If there were to be another election again soon, the Conservatives would still have to be about 10% ahead of the Labour Party. Had there been a Conservative minority government, however, it would have been the second successive government we have had to secure

just over a third of the vote. In other words, nearly two thirds of the country voted against the Conservatives, as they voted against the majority Labour Government in 2005. This, I think, puts an ironic spin on the notion of majority rule. But of course the coalition does represent a majority. It has an overall majority of 78 in the House of Commons, and represents 59% of the voters, if one assumes that those who voted Conservatives and Liberal Democrats would have supported a coalition between them, a shaky assumption perhaps.

Much nonsense is being talked in the media about who is entitled to rule. The constitutional answer is quite simple: Parliament decides who is to rule. Any Prime Minister is entitled to stay in power to test the opinion of Parliament. Indeed, it was the custom until 1868 for Prime Ministers to remain in office until Parliament met. Disraeli, when he was defeated in that year was the first to resign immediately, believing that it would be a waste of time to meet Parliament. In 1997 John Major could constitutionally have met Parliament if he had wished and presented a Queen's Speech. But that would obviously have been a waste of time. When, however, there is no clear result, Parliament decides.

Let us now look at the arithmetic. The Conservatives hold 307 seats and other parties have 343 seats and of the other parties, most of them are opposed to the Conservatives. 10 million people voted Conservative, 19 million people did not vote Conservative. You may say that the non-Labour vote is much larger than that. But most of the non-Labour parties are sympathetic to Labour. The Social Democratic and Labour Party in Northern Ireland and the Nationalist Parties said they would prefer a Labour government in Westminster to a Conservative government. The Liberal Democrats were the key element. Survey evidence shows that most of their supporters thought of them as a party of the Left. It was for the parliamentary party to decide. Had they decided that they were a party of the left, then arithmetically there would have been a left-wing majority in Parliament. Had the Labour Party under Gordon Brown remained in office until the Queen's Speech and produced a Queen's Speech which provided for a referendum on proportional representation, it would have been very quixotic for Liberal Democrat MPs to have voted against it. The last time there was legislative provision for reform of the electoral system was in 1931 when the minority Labour government of Ramsay MacDonald introduced provision

for the alternative vote. That bill was passed by the Commons but faced wrecking amendments in the Lords. Before those could be considered, the government was swept away by a financial crisis. That was 80 years ago. Liberal Democrats do not want to wait for another 80 years for a second chance. But of course the formation of a government was not just a problem of arithmetic. Arithmetic might have been on the side of the left, but political momentum was on the side of the right, and that in the end proved crucial.

There is one final point of importance. A Conservative minority government would have been a majority government in England. It could be defeated only by the votes of MPs sitting for non-English constituencies. But, if it were to be defeated by the votes of MPs sitting for non-English constituencies on matters which are devolved in Scotland, e.g. education, health, this would cause an English backlash. Further, the Conservatives have no seats in the major conurbations of the Midlands and the North: they have no seats at all in Birmingham, Bradford, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, Leicester, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham or Sheffield. That is another difference with 1951. It could lead to problems of legitimacy for the new government if public expenditure cuts affect the great cities or Scotland.

Of course, the lack of Conservative representation in the large cities and in Scotland does not mean that no one votes Conservative there. There is a large conservative vote in the major cities, but it is a minority vote and therefore not represented. It is often said that the electoral system discriminates against third parties but it also discriminates against second parties where that party is weak and therefore makes the country look more divided than it is. For example, in Scotland, one sixth of the voters voted Conservative, but they have just one Member of Parliament out of 59.

Outside England, there are nine Conservative MPs and 108 non-Conservative MPs. Suppose there had been a government of the left. This would have commanded 235 seats in England as compared with 298 for the Conservatives. Therefore a government for the left could only secure its legislation through the votes of MPs sitting for non-English constituencies. Again, we are talking about MPs from non-English constituencies deciding English education, health, transport and so on, matters which are devolved in Scotland and Wales. Would a government of the left

have had a mandate to govern England? One may say that a Conservative government would not have a mandate to govern Scotland and a government of the left would not have a mandate to govern England, so the West Lothian question returns with a vengeance.

The Conservatives propose in their election manifesto to provide for English votes for English laws: only English MPs should vote for English laws. That, I fear, would create a further problem. That is because the amount of money Scotland gets out of the block fund depends, through the Barnett formula, on how much is spent in England. There is a knock-on effect. If a government cuts English public expenditure on education and health, there is a knock-on effect in Scotland, so Scotland receives less money to spend. That is why the Scots must continue to be represented at Westminster where those decisions are taken on all matters; otherwise the Scots are being taxed without representation. This means that one can only have English votes for English laws on matters that do not involve public expenditure such as, for example, hunting. But it would be unreasonable for the Scots to abstain on any matter involving public expenditure since the size of their block fund from London depends on expenditure in England.

My conclusion is that, even apart from discrepancies between votes and seats, the electoral system has become territorially destabilising and a positive threat to the continued unity of the country. It seems to me that a change to the electoral system could prevent both an English backlash and also Scottish independence.

There were only two possible outcomes after the election: some form of minority government or some form of coalition government. Minority governments do not have a very happy history in Britain. The minority government of 1924 lasted less than a year; the minority government of 1929 lasted for just over two years with the help of an agreement with the Liberals, but it collapsed in the financial crisis of 1931 and in that election, the Labour Party was reduced to 46 seats, though ironically it won 33% of the vote, 4% more of the vote than it gained in this election. The Wilson minority government in 1974 allowed inflation to go through the roof, it reached 26% but since Wilson knew that he faced a second election, he was not prepared to take measures to control inflation. The Callaghan minority government of 1976 lasted

longer because it had an agreement with the Liberals but when that agreement ended, it collapsed in 1979 after the ‘winter of discontent’ and the Labour Party went into opposition for 18 years. So minority governments do not really have a very attractive history and governments with small majorities do not last long either. The 1950 Labour government, returned with a majority of six, lasted for 18 months, and the Wilson government of 1964 which had a majority of three also lasted for around 18 months. John Major in 1992 found that a majority even of 21 was barely sufficient. He had difficulty getting the Maastricht Treaty through Parliament. John Major was fond of saying that he had a majority of 21, 13 of whom were mad. It was a great problem to run a government facing divisive issues on such a small majority. But the coalition has a majority of 78 and is likely to last for some time, perhaps even for the five years envisaged in the coalition agreement.

Questions and Answers

Question: “One of the things that emerges from your dazzling presentation is that working out what system to put in place of the one that we now have is as at least as complicated as diagnosing the problem. Do you have any thoughts on the way forward?”

Master Bogdanor: “I think if we got into a debate about the merits of various systems, members and quotas and so on, we would put the audience to sleep very rapidly. As the term “proportional representation” implies, it is not the name of a single system but a generic term referring to many different systems with many different qualities and properties. It is fair to say that proportional representation has become part of the British political culture because of course we have it in Northern Ireland in the form of the ‘single transferable vote’, the ‘additional member system’ in Scotland, Wales and the London Assembly, and the ‘regional list system’ in the European Parliament. There are three different proportional representation systems already in operation in Britain. I would add that the alternative vote system which the coalition proposes is not a proportional system and indeed in the elections of 1997 and 2001 this system would have given Labour an even larger majority. That is because, given the electoral geography, it is biased against the interests of the Conservative Party, which tends to win more seats on a split vote than Labour. It is not a

proportional system. The alternative vote plus which was the system recommended by the Jenkins inquiry is proportional because it tops up constituency representation with county lists to create proportionality. But as I say, if we go on for a long time about which PR system is best, people will rapidly fall asleep, and that would be a good way to empty the Hall!”

Question: “Could I invite you nonetheless to speculate and look a little further ahead into the future. A question that much vexed my tutors on constitutional law years and years ago was this: Suppose that we have a Labour government supported by the Liberal Democrats, it survives the Queen’s Speech but collapses very quickly, perhaps on the budget or something else. There used to be protracted arguments as to whether in those circumstances the Queen retained a residual discretion to refuse a dissolution of Parliament at the request of a Prime Minister in those circumstances where there was someone else in that Parliament who might be able to form a government. Do you think in modern conditions the Queen could get herself involved with a decision that might be controversial i.e. refusing a dissolution, or would she in fact accede to a request for another election?”

Professor Bogdanor: “The Queen does have the right to refuse a dissolution. For example, if Gordon Brown after this election had gone immediately to the Palace and said that, as it was an unclear result, there should be a second dissolution, the Queen would be perfectly justified in saying no. I do not think anyone would argue with that. To take a more extreme example, if, after John Major had been defeated in 1997, instead of resigning he had said to the Queen, “As your advisor I would like to have another election”, she could clearly say no.

The basic principle is that the Queen has to be absolutely certain that there is an alternative and viable government available. In 1924, when the first MacDonald government was defeated on a confidence vote in the Commons, the King’s Private Secretary asked the other party leaders if they were prepared to form a government. Only when they had given a negative answer did the King agree to a dissolution. But the sovereign has to be very careful, because there is a famous Canadian precedent from 1926 when the Governor General, the King’s representative, refused a dissolution because he had a promise that a small minority party would support the

opposition and therefore there would be a viable alternative government. But the promise evaporated since MPs in the smaller party changed their mind. The Governor General then looked partisan. I think that in such a situation, a written coalition agreement or something similar would be needed to convince the Queen that an alternative government could survive. In those circumstances I think the Queen would be justified in refusing and perhaps in these circumstances, the Prime Minister would not ask for one. The Queen has a right to refuse if a dissolution is illegitimately sought or if there is an alternative government available in Parliament.”

Question from Lord Butler: “I was asked to debate with you on television later this evening, but I turned down the invitation so I could dine at Middle Temple. I say this in order to curry support from the audience. So I am going to put to you the point which I would have put to you on television. Your presentation, if I may say so, was charismatically brilliant but was gloomy and wasn’t it also a little cynical? I noticed you did not make any reference to the economic circumstances the country faces and indeed the politicians have been very prominent in saying that they were motivated to provide a stable government which can deal with this situation. The most stable government would be a Conservative and Liberal Democrat government. Do you discount completely these grand words which the politicians have been saying about their principal motive in agreeing to form a long-lasting and stable government which can deal with the country’s economic problems?”

Professor Bogdanor: “If I had seen you in the audience, Robin, I would have been even more nervous than I am now. You are obviously right arithmetically that a Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition provides a stable government. Twice since the war the Liberals have been offered coalitions with the Conservatives. In 1951, Churchill, although he had a small majority of 17 offered the Liberal leader (remember the Liberals had only six seats) Clement Davies the Ministry of Education, and Davies wanted it very much but the Party would not let him take it; because of that, the Party survived. There would not have been a Liberal Party if they had joined the Churchill Government. Liberal survival is really due to that forgotten figure, Clement Davies. In 1974 Heath offered Thorpe the Home Secretary-ship. I think you were there at the time, Robin. I believe Thorpe very much wanted to accept but the Party would not let him. The history of Liberal coalitions with Conservatives in the

past is not very happy. In each case, they were the cause or consequence of a Liberal split. The Liberal Unionists in the 1880s and the Liberal Nationals of the 1930s were absorbed by the Conservatives. The Lloyd George Liberal/Conservative coalition divided the Liberal Party from top to bottom and the independent Liberals in the 1930s left the National Government after a year because of a disagreement on free trade. In 2010, most of the Liberals in the Commons won their seats against Conservatives; Clegg hoped to make large inroads into Labour seats but he did not do that and therefore the Liberals primarily are anti-Conservative. You are of course right, Robin, that a Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition can provide a stable government for a long time.

I would like to make another point about the financial crisis. Perhaps some people are getting a little hysterical about it. To us it seems peculiar to take a little time to form a government, but people who live in Frankfurt understand that it may take some time to form a government. People know that we are not Greece and do not deceive about our budget deficit; we will not default. Britain is a haven of stability compared with the Euro-zone or even the United States.”

Question: “If you were a backbench Conservative MP wondering what the effects of proportional representation or a single transferable vote would have on the Conservative Party in the future, what would your view be?”

Professor Bogdanor: “If I were a backbench Conservative, I might well not support it. Conservatives say that it will give permanent power to the Liberal Democrats as a centre party, and there will be permanent coalitions. That is also what Margaret Thatcher thought. There remains a great deal of hostility between Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats at grassroots level, great differences of opinion on the matters which David Cameron perfectly fairly outlined: Europe, immigration, defence, and also a disagreement on when the cuts should take place with the Liberal Democrats. Vince Cable agreed with Labour that they should not occur until the recovery is assured, while the Conservatives took the view that they should occur immediately with an emergency budget. So, even apart from proportional representation there are other large differences between the parties. As a Conservative, I would not support proportional representation but if I were a Liberal Democrat I should do all I could to

change the electoral system to avoid being squeezed in the next election. In 1951 and in 1924 the Liberal vote was squeezed and also in the second general election in 1974.”

Question: “If there were another referendum, should it be first past the post or something else or should it be seven different kinds of fruit salad?”

Professor Bogdanor: “New Zealand, which has a similar system to ours, changed their electoral system in the 1990s in two stages. First, there was a referendum on which of the alternative systems the voters wished to have. The voters chose the additional member system of the kind used in Scotland, Wales and London and then that was put in a referendum against first past the post. So there were two referendums, the first a multi-option one. New Zealanders could manage that. They changed to proportional representation; their world has not fallen in.

It would, I suppose, be for the Liberal Democrats to decide which system they wanted to put to the voters. In the past people who wanted change have been divided by the kind of change they wanted. There would have to be some sort of agreement on which alternative system ought to be considered by the electorate. New Zealand is a very interesting country to study and I believe that Robin’s successor but three, Sir Gus O’Donnell, visited New Zealand before the election to look at how they cope with hung Parliaments because of course with proportional representation, every Parliament is hung. It is a Westminster-type system like Britain without a written constitution and introduced proportional representation in the 1990s.”

Question: “You have spoken about different systems, which would be the one that you would choose?”

Professor Bogdanor: “The one I favour but do not expect to get is the single transferable vote which is used in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. It has an interesting history. It was invented by a lawyer called Thomas Hare. Hare wrote not just on elections but also on more technical legal matters. His is an interesting rags-to-riches Victorian story: Hare was an orphan who made his way in the world, and became a lawyer. His allegiance in the mid-19th century was to the Peelites who

broke off from the Conservatives. He did not want to join the Liberals; he wanted to keep his independent political identity. He thought it would also be a good thing if there were more intellectuals in Parliament and he said that the trouble with the British system was that it was bounded by geography. In each constituency, the intellectuals were in a minority – except perhaps for the Middle Temple where they are a majority! But there are enough intellectuals across the country as a whole to elect representatives of intellectuals. Hare’s original idea was that there should be a ballot paper with 650 blank spaces. Every voter would make up his own list. One might put John Stuart Mill at the top of the list, then Thomas Hare and so on. This was called, you will not be surprised to hear, a “Hare-brained scheme”! It was then transformed into the single transferable vote based on multi- member constituencies and preferential voting and supported by John Stuart Mill who favoured it because it enabled minorities to be properly represented.

Hare said that when defending first past the post, we assumed that only the majority should be represented. Instead, the majority should **rule**, but all significant minorities should be represented. The single transferable vote was first proposed in Parliament by John Stuart Mill who has the great honour of being the first MP to propose female suffrage and also proportional representation. He wrote about it in great detail in his book on representative government.

I favour it because it combines a general election with a primary election so you are not just voting for a Labour Party, a Conservative Party, but you are also choosing which candidates you want. You may be a Labour Party supporter but a Euro-sceptic. Under the single transferable vote, there might be five Labour candidates in five member constituencies. One might then give one’s first preference to a Labour Euro-sceptic; or one might think it is very important to have a woman in Parliament. Parties have to present a balanced list. They cannot present five Anglo-Saxon males. In an area where many members of ethnic minorities live, they would have to present non-white candidates, and of course two or three out of the five would have to be women. One might vote across parties to make sure women get in or Euro-sceptics get in. The system gives a much greater degree of choice; it is basically a product of 19th century liberalism aiming to widen the degree of choice. I do not think that we will get it because it goes against parties’ interests to have their own members fighting

against each other. But to my mind it is by far the best system. It is used in the Irish Republic, in Northern Ireland for all elections bar Parliamentary elections, and it is now also used in Scottish local government elections.”

Question: “On the basis that a Liberal Labour government would have been likely to fall within a very short time, do you not think that there is a part of David Cameron who kept his fingers crossed that the Liberal Democrats would refuse his overtures?”

Professor Bogdanor: “Such a government would have been very shaky. It would, however, have been supported by Alex Salmond and the Scottish and Welsh nationalists. The nationalists favoured it, presumably because a government of the Left, by contrast with the Conservatives, did not believe in immediate public expenditure cuts in Scotland and Wales. It would also be unstable for another reason I gave earlier: it would not have had a majority in England. But such a government could have introduced a referendum on proportional representation and given people a chance to decide whether they wanted to continue with the present system. But I think, contrary to what most suggested that there was an overall majority for a government to the left, although the political momentum was against it. It would have been a losers’ coalition. The momentum was with the Conservatives.”

Question: “I’ll start by saying that Britain is known to be one of the best democracies in the world. Why do we need referendums and other such reforms?”

Professor Bogdanor: “In the 1950s, people were much more prepared to allow politicians to make decisions for them. That is the era of the famous comment by Douglas Jay to the effect that the man in Whitehall knows best. People don’t accept that any more and since they have so much choice in other aspects of their lives, in the economy, in public services and so on, I think they want a wider choice in politics as well and this is why we have had pressure for primary elections, recall of MPs and for referendums. The constitutional reforms of the Blair government were an important part of its programme; it didn’t deal with that aspect. It redistributed power sideways as it were, but it did not redistribute power downwards.”

Question: “If the motivation behind electoral reform is fairness, why in the first instance can’t we have equal-sized constituencies? I speak as a bitter resident of the Isle of Wight.”

Professor Bogdanor: “The Boundary Commission Vice-Chairman was Lord Justice Sullivan - the Chairman is the Speaker, but he plays no role. The Commission reported in 2006 on the basis of population in 2000 and therefore it was already out of date when it reported. It is of course even more out of date now as the movement of population continues, broadly from the cities to the countryside. This disadvantages the Conservatives. Part of the reason why the Commission takes so long is the pressure for public consultation. It could have been done much more quickly. But the unequal size of constituencies is not the main reason why we have such disproportion in the vote. The main reasons are that the Labour vote is more efficiently distributed from a geographical point of view than the Conservative vote and the Liberal Democrat vote, and also the turnout is higher in Conservative seats. Conservatives pile up huge majorities in safe seats where they do not need them. That is not something that can be remedied by a Boundary Commission. In South Africa in 1948 there were just two parties and roughly equal constituencies, but the Nationalist Party, although it had fewer votes than the United Party, won the election, because the United Party piled up huge majorities in urban areas, while the nationalists won more seats with small majorities in rural areas. So neither the first past the post system nor the alternative vote (single-member constituency systems) can secure proportionality of representation. The point of proportional representation is to take the geography out of elections, for the way that first past the post works is that the number of seats a party wins depends not only on how many votes it gets but also on the geographical distribution of that vote. The Liberal Democrat vote is much more evenly distributed which means it comes second in lots of places but not first. If the Liberal Democrats got over 40 – 41% of the vote, then they would start to come first everywhere. Labour, by contrast, has concentrations of votes in some areas but not in others and the Conservatives even more so. It is the geography of the system that is the basis of first past the post and proportional representation takes the geography out of elections.”