

PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION AND DEVELOPMENT: SOME CRITICAL THOUGHTS¹

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THE issue of a majority electoral system versus proportional representation has been debated for years.² It rears its head after every British election, and it is increasingly discussed in Malta. But the effects of electoral systems on local government have all but been ignored, as have the respective merits of the systems in underdeveloped areas.

The partisans of proportional representation (P.R.) maintain that it is more democratic because it allows all significant segments of public opinion to be represented in proportion to the popular vote they receive. They hold that this results in a continuum of opinion in parliament, and that therefore the divisions in the society will be less pronounced and bitter. This results in a greater degree of co-operation, an important factor if no single party is in a commanding position. Finally, because the system provides for a large choice of candidates who advocate diverse points of view, there is less need to form new parties in order to promote particu-

¹Earlier drafts of this paper were read to a seminar at the University of Sussex, and discussed at the Mediterranean Social Sciences Research Council conference on local and regional factors influencing national development, held in Malta, December 13-16, 1965 and subsequently published in the *Journal of Development Studies* (Boissevain 1971). The Sicilian field work in 1962/63 upon which much of argument is based was greatly assisted by the generosity of the Centro Regionale per lo Sviluppo di Comunità through the good offices of Rev. S. Duynstee, the Penrose fund of the American Philosophical Society and the Co-operative for American Relief to Everywhere (C.A.R.E., Inc.). A return trip to Sicily during the summer of 1965 was made possible by a Faculty Research grant from the Social Science Research Council. Mart Bax further stimulated my thinking on the argument and suggested additional literature.

²An abundant literature exists on the subject in so far as it relates to government at the national level (Lakeman, 1955, pp. 296-8; MacKenzie, 1958, pp. 177-80).

lar views. They also indicate that the system is universally applicable; that because it is more democratic, it is better (Lakeman, 1955, pp. 198ff., 231-3).³ They do not accept the criticism of their opponents that it leads to the multiplication of factions and parties which in turn result in unstable and ineffective government. Lakeman and Lambert, for example, after examining its effects on the governments of 13 countries, conclude categorically that proportional representation does not lead to an in-ordinate multiplicity of parties or to unstable government. They claim that in no country previously free from them have these disadvantages developed through changing to a proportional system (Lakeman, 1955, p. 198).⁴

What I propose to do now is to examine the consequences that the introduction of proportional representation in 1960 have had upon local government in Sicily, which until then had been directed by town councils elected according to a majority system. Since I shall be examining the conclusions of Lakeman and Lambert, it will be useful to keep in mind the four purposes which they suggest are the *raison d'être* for the establishment of elections: '(i) A parliament reflecting the main trends of opinion within the electorate. (ii) Government according to the wishes of the majority of the electorate. (iii) The election of representatives whose personal qualities best fit them for the function of government. (iv) Strong and stable government' (Lakeman, 1955, p. 24).

MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT

Leone, a pseudonym for the Sicilian town in which I carried out

³ The position of those who advocate proportional representation has been forcefully expressed by Professor J.F.S. Ross:

It seems probable that, if they once really grasped the nature of the issue, most democratically minded people would become convinced upholders of the representative principle and would, moreover, be unable to see in it anything incompatible with good and efficient government (Ross, 1955, p. 10).

⁴ Cf. Duverger (1963, pp. 245-55), however, who points out that P.R. favours multi-partism and particularly the emergency of small parties. Moreover, 'in the few local elections in which proportional representation has from time to time been tried it shattered the two-party system' (Duverger, 1963, pp. 218-70).

field work in 1962/63, is an agro-town of 20,000. Civil authority is exercised by the mayor, the magistrate and the *carabinieri*. The mayor is one of the 32 councillors who make up the Leone town council, which is elected every five years (before 1964 it was every four years) by universal adult suffrage. They in turn choose from among themselves the mayor and the five *assessori* who assist him and with him form the executive *giunta*. The junta makes all decisions regarding local affairs. The full town council meets only a few times a year, to discuss matters of major policy.

All employees of the Town Hall are appointed by the junta with the approval of the provincial authorities. The only exception is the municipal secretary, an outside administrative officer posted to the town by the National Ministry of the Interior. But the assistant-secretary, a Leonese, has in fact been the acting secretary for years, since the municipality has not found a qualified person willing to serve there, as the town has a reputation of being a trying place in which to work. All the other men who work in the Town Hall are Leonesi.

The post-war political history of Leone may be divided in two: the period of Socialist control which lasted until 1958, and the unstable administration following that. From the end of the war until 1958 Leone was governed by a 'red' junta composed of the Socialists (P.S.I.) supported by the Communists (P.C.I.). It was opposed by a bloc formed of the Christian Democrats (D.C.) and the minor parties such as the Fascists (M.S.I.). Until 1960 each bloc contested the elections with a unified list of candidates. In spite of its very slender electoral majority the Socialist-Communist bloc maintained a clear majority in the town council, where it held 24 out of the 32 seats. The results of the post-war elections for the town council are given below in Tables I and II⁵

⁵ Further details about Leone and the National and regional elections in town may be found in Boissevain (1966b).

Table I
LEONE TOWN COUNCIL ELECTION RESULTS
(PERCENT OF VALID VOTES)

	DC- MSI	PCI- PSI	DC	PCI	PSI	MSI	PSDI	USCS	PRI	PSIUP	MISC.	TOTAL
1946	42	58										100
1953	46	54										100
1956	49.7	50.3										100
1960			31	30	20	8	1	9	-	-	1	100
1964			31	25	21	8	7	-	3	3	2	100

Table II
LEONE MUNICIPAL COUNCILLORS

	DC- MSI	PCI- PSI	DC	PCI	PSI	MSI	PSDI	USCS	PRI	PSIUP	MISC.	TOTAL %
1946	8	24										32
1953	8	24										32
1956	8	24										32
1960			10	10	7	2	-	3	-	-	-	32
1964			11	9	7	2	2	-	1	-	-	32

The P.S.I. - P.C.I. bloc held its stable majority in the town council thanks to the electoral system then in effect. This was a majority list system with provision for cross-voting for which the whole town formed a single constituency. To ensure that the winning list had a strong working majority in the town council its strength was multiplied: the majority list regardless of the size of its winning margin automatically received three-quarters of the seats on the council (24 out of 32). The remainder were given to the candidates with the most preferential votes on the rival (or next most successful) list.

In short, this simple majority system which multiplied the strength of the majority list (50.1 per cent of the votes would win

75 per cent of the seats) insured administrative stability (in theory and usually in practice) until the next election, for to bring the junta down required at least 9 councillors to pass to the opposition, an unlikely occurrence. The constant pressure by the opposition to get councillors to defect, and so to bring down the junta, a manoeuvre which became common following 1960, was minimized by the assured large majority of the coalition forming the administration.

The Socialist control over the junta ended in 1958 following a long and better law suit which arose out of the 1956 municipal elections. This election was extremely close. The difference between the two coalitions was a matter of only 53 votes (4,587 to 4,534). Trouble arose when one of the supervising officials 'forgot' to countersign the returns from one of the town's voting districts. The Socialists and Communists claim that this was done by design. The Christian Democrats maintain it was by oversight, and promptly filed suit to have the votes declared invalid. This would have given the majority in the town to the list presented by the D.C. and its allies. The case was finally tried in 1958. The court awarded costs against the Socialists, but declared the entire election void. The provincial Prefect ordered the Socialist junta to resign, and appointed a commissioner to take over the town's administration.

ELECTORAL REFORM

Just before the 1960 municipal elections the Regional Government, under pressure from most of the parties to limit the power of the Christian Democrats in municipal politics, replaced the majority system described above with a form of proportional representation (the Hondt method) in all towns with populations exceeding 5,000. This, of course, affected Leone, although, in contrast to most Sicilian towns, it had been run by a red coalition. Henceforth the number of councillors elected from each party was to be in proportion to the total popular votes each party received. It thus became possible for even the small parties to be represented on the council.

The immediate result of the new law was to divide the two opposing blocs into their constituent parties, splitting the Communists from the Socialists, and freeing the Fascists and other small

parties from their dependence on the Christian Democrats. Henceforth each could gain a place on the council without having to go into coalition to fight the election. But because the alignment of parties on the Left was evenly matched by the conservative parties, the small parties and factions began to play a role out of proportion to their numerical strength. In this respect the administrative junta began to reflect the situation prevailing at the regional and national level where proportional representation had been in use since the war. It now became possible for the small parties, factions of the larger ones and even individual councillors to play the Left off against the Right, and so to enter the municipal junta. *Thus the proportional system of voting introduced an element of instability into the local scene which, in contrast to the unstable national and regional situation, had hitherto been characterized by its stability.* The administrative junta became a fragile coalition which depended upon the support of the minor parties and, at times, upon the whims of a single councillor. As a result, there was great instability: from November 1960 to May 1963 five different coalitions ran the affairs of the town.

POLITICAL MUSICAL CHAIRS

As the 1960 election was the first time the votes of the Communist surpassed the Socialists, the first coalition was formed by the ten Communist councillors with the reluctant support of the seven Socialists. The Socialists leaders, who were far better educated than their Communist rivals, refused to participate in the junta as they considered the Communists incapable of running the town's administration. The Communists thus formed the junta by themselves, and the town's professional class politicians sat back to watch the 'peasants' make a mess of the administration. Various *mafiosi* also began to try and force the Communist mayor to resign. As the Communist Party was the only political party in Sicily which consistently and openly attacked the *mafia* and whose leaders by and large rejected its support, the new Communist administration was a threat to the personal interests of the local *mafiosi* as well as to those whom they normally protected.

The Communists proved to be fairly efficient. In spite of their inexperience they worked hard and were honest. The Communist

junta did not destroy itself by its administrative incapacity. In spite of vicious anonymous letters threatening his life, the mayor remained in office. The junta's downfall came from quite a different direction.

The coalition had a majority of only one. To bring it down and form a new junta, its enemies needed to find two councillors willing to cross the floor. Within three months they had located several weak members of the governing coalition. Two cousins, both members of the middle class, one of whom was a member of the junta, left the Communist Party and joined the Christian Democrats. According to town gossip, one changed because he was given a white-collar job in the provincial capital through the intervention of a D.C. Deputy. The other is alleged to have received sizeable scholarships for his sons from an exclusive church-run college. When asked about this sudden change, one replied that it was his duty to think of the well-being and advancement of his family. (Their behaviour, if true, may be contrasted with the sacrifice of the peasant *assessore* of public works. Although he received no remuneration from the municipality (only the mayor receives a stipend) he none the less left his steady employment as a labourer in a stone quarry in order to carry out his new administrative assignment. He was personally quiet relieved when the junta fell so that he could go back to work to support his family and pay off the debts he had accumulated).

At about the same time two other members of the Communist junta, including the Party's only professional-class member, passed to the Saragat Socialists (P.S.D.I.). At the vote on the annual budget, three Socialists also voted against the junta. According to town gossip, once again, this was in response to *mafia* pressure. Thus defeated 22 to 10, the Communist junta resigned.⁶

The second junta was elected by the 12 D.C. councillors with the support of the three U.S.C.S. councillors and the two Fascists. Again there was a majority of only one. The junta itself was composed of three Christian Democrats, a Fascist and a member of

⁶The balloting for the election of a mayor is secret. This and subsequent reports on the actual voting are therefore based upon the opinions of a wide cross-section of informants who believed the voting had gone this way.

the U.S.C.S. (a regional party which split from the D.C. but has since disappeared). The mayor was Christian Democrat as was the vice-mayor, who was one of the two ex-Communists who had crossed over to the D.C. This appointment is alleged to have been part of the bargain he made when he left the Communists and joined the Christian Democrats. This combination lasted eight months. It was destroyed through the manoeuvring of the young secretary of the Christian Democrat Party in Leone. He wished to form a new junta in combination with the Socialists, with himself as mayor. This was ostensibly in accordance with his party's directives to create local alliances with the Socialists in imitation of the new formed Centro-Sinistro (Centre-Left) alliance between the two at the national level. The members of the faction headed by the D.C. secretary voted against their colleague on the budget, and brought the second junta crashing down.

The third junta was not led by the D.C. secretary, much to his disgust, but by the leader of the U.S.C.S., a respected lawyer and a former secretary of the D.C. He was elected by the three votes of his own party, the two Fascists and the seven members of the conservative faction in the D.C. headed by the outgoing mayor, as well as by five Socialists councillors who opposed the idea of a local Centro-Sinistra in general, and the mayorship of the ambitious D.C. party secretary in particular. These provided the necessary 17 votes. Again there was a majority of only one. This unlikely combination lasted only a few months before it fell apart over the vote on its budget.

The fourth junta was formed by the seven Socialists and three U.S.C.S. with the external support of the six Communists. This provided a total of 16 votes. The crucial 17th vote was furnished by the vice-mayor of the previous junta, a prominent member of the D.C., who in return for betraying his party was made vice-mayor in the new administration. Thus the Socialists resumed the administration of the town after an interval of four years.

Meanwhile the secretary of the D.C., with the help of the party's provincial secretary, who threatened members of the anti-Centro-Sinistra faction of the party with expulsion, succeeded in whipping the party back in line. That is, all save the vice-mayor, who was thrown out of the party for his treason, becoming an 'independen-

dent' councillor. The astute D.C. secretary had also managed to secure the support of three Socialists, including the local Socialist secretary, to whom he offered the post of vice-mayor. He also lined up the co-operation of two ex-Communists councillors who had become Saragat Socialists, as well as the two Fascists. Moreover, two of the three U.S.C.S. councillors rejoined the D.C., from which they had broken several years before. The third became an 'independent'. The U.S.C.S. thus ceased to exist as a local party. Three months after Socialist junta took office, the D.C. secretary, with 20 votes committed to him, was strong enough to defeat the Socialist mayor over his budget.

The fifth junta, headed by the D.C. secretary and formed of representatives of all the local parties save the Communists, got off to a difficult start. The Provincial Federation of the Socialist party became so enraged with its Leone secretary for entering as vice-mayor in a junta with a Fascist, that it ordered him to withdraw under pain of expulsion from the party. But, I was given to understand, it relented somewhat when it learned that certain *mafiosi* had threatened to make life for the new vice-mayor very disagreeable (if not also short) if he did resign. I left the town at this point in its political history.

The inherent instability of the municipal junta which followed the introduction of the new 'democratic' electoral law, has had important repercussions on the internal politics of Leone, as well as on the quality of its local administration. Instead of having a stable working majority, the life of each junta often depends upon a single vote. This has given increased power to individual councillors: each councillor supporting the junta has the power to destroy it. His vote thus becomes a weapon with which he can threaten the junta. Councillors have exercised this power to the detriment of the town.

MALADMINISTRATION

The constantly changing responsibility for the town's affairs weakened administrative control in Leone, and made planning impossible. Because members of the junta know they will not be in power long, they usually, work to draw the maximum advantage out of their positions for themselves, their families, their protectors and their clients. They have little to fear from public opinion by

acting in this way: the public assumes that they are doing just this. Discovery of some questionable affair merely confirms the belief already held. The result has been an escalating maladministration.

The case of the family tax provides a good example of how receptiveness to a constant series of pressures affects municipal affairs. Each family is supposed to pay a small annual tax based on its income.⁷ In 1958 under the stable Socialist administration, the town collected approximately 10,000,000 lire annually. Since then no junta has had the strength to enforce this law, or to exercise a tight control over municipal business. The result has been that a constant stream of relatives, friends and friends-of-friends, working through town concillors and municipal employees, have succeeded in amending the tax assessment records to the point where in 1963 only about 3,000,000 lira were being actually collected each year. This in spite of the great increase in the income levels and standard of living during the same period.

The lack of control over the town's government and the increased vulnerability of the junta has brought about a progressive wastage of the town's already limited resources. The total debt of the town, which stood at 30,000,000 lira in 1958, had risen to a staggering 310,000,000 lira by 1963. Moreover, it was increasing by some 77,600,000 lira annually. The town had all but exhausted its credit sources; the chronic deadlock over its budget further limited its credit with the regional government. One of the results of this depressing financial situation is that municipal employees are paid only two or three times a year, and then only after prolonged and often bitter strikes. These paralyse local affairs for as long as three months at a time.

Even when they are not on strike, the municipal police have ceased to enforce local ordinances effectively. All a person has to do to have a traffic or building code violation suppressed is to go and see his protector on the town council. He, in turn, sees the member concerned of the junta. If the latter does not quash the charges, the protector threatens to withdraw his support of the junta and so to destroy it. Faced with this alternative, the assessor tears up the charge.

⁷This is collected for the municipality by an agency to which the municipal taxes determined by the Town Hall have been farmed.

'It's got to the point where the police don't even bother to issue the summons any more,' an informant exclaimed. '*Porca miseria!* These rotten politicians are ruining the town with their dirty games and personal ambitions. What we need is a strong hand to clean them up'. He then sighed wistfully for Mussolini.

We thus have the paradox of the more democratic 1960 electoral law making it easier for self-seeking politicians to manipulate the system for their own benefit, thus bringing greater administrative chaos to the affairs of the town. Moreover, the members of the junta have been too preoccupied with their own political survival to be able to apply pressure on patrons in Palermo to obtain the development funds to which the town is entitled. They see little point in trying to do this as in all likelihood they would no longer be in office when the funds were released, a fact which their friends in Palermo also recognize. The administrative instability has thus even stifled party initiative motivated by self interest. As long as this situation prevails, Leone is patently incapable of solving its many development problems by working through its elected leaders. Though in 1963 the mass of the people had a better income and a higher standard of living than ever before – thanks to increased government social benefits and the added income from emigrant labour – the municipality was poorer and its affairs more thoroughly disorganised than before 1958, when people were living in appalling misery. A paradox which just confirms the popular belief that all government is corrupt.

But it must not be thought that this administrative instability and maladministration are limited to West Sicilian municipalities which have a system of proportional representation. Here I have argued that P.R. favours instability and maladministration more than a majority system does. It is not the only cause of these problems. They are ills which affect municipal administration throughout the South of Italy.⁸

⁸Cf. C.C.E. (1965. Ch.9), I.S.P.E.S. (1964) and reports on municipal *crisi* appearing in regional newspapers. N.T. Colclough, in a fascinating recent study (1969), shows that even in a small farming village using a majority system, the local administration is far from rose-coloured. Although the successive municipal administrations stay in power longer than in Leone, they too are characterized by malgovernment, and interal factionalism makes long-term administrative planning all but impossible (Colclough, 1969, p.202).

DISCUSSION

At this point we may ask how many of Lakeman and Lambert's electoral objectives the introduction of proportional representation has attained in Sicily. I suggest only one, and that with reservations. To begin with, it does not furnish 'government according to the wishes of the people'. Nor does it provide for the election of 'representatives whose personal qualities best fit them for the function of government'. Finally, it most certainly does not ensure a 'strong and stable government'. Though municipal councils do 'reflect the main trends of opinion within the electorate', the minor parties exercise power out of all proportion to their electoral strength. *The result is thus not proportional, but disproportional representation.*

Why does proportional representation not appear to work in Sicily? Professor Mackenzie has suggested that among the minimum conditions necessary to introduce free elections is

A general acceptance throughout the political community of certain rather vague rules of the game, which limit the struggle for power because of some unspoken sentiment that if the rules are not observed more or less faithfully, the game itself will disappear amid the wreckage of the whole system (Mackenzie, 1958, p. 24).

In Sicily, quite simply, people don't play the game according to the rules suggested by the scholarly advocates of proportional representation. These, for the most part, are academics in the older nation-states of North West Europe. Moreover, there is little fear at the moment that because they do use the same rules, the 'game itself will disappear amid the wreckage of the system'. The game as well as the system are propped up by the Italian constitution, the Ministry of the Interior and the sacred but unanalysed notion that what is more democratic is better. Since they assume the system cannot collapse, they play the game according to the rule which is traditional to Scicilian society: namely, that a man's first and ultimate responsibility is to provide for and safe-guard his own interests and those of his family. The North European notion that a person owes something to the political community, and thus should use a different set of rules is foreign. It conflicts di-

rectly with his responsibility to his family and with the belief that all others are looking out for their own interests first.

CONCLUSION

The object of this paper is to urge law makers in developing countries to consider the harmful effects that proportional representation may have in the field of development. Some of the problems to which I have pointed are inherent in all democratic systems. None the less, a majority system can ensure somewhat more stability, thus allowing for greater administrative continuity than proportional representation. Moreover, a system which ensures the winner of a sizeable majority reduces the power of politicians to manipulate the system to their own advantage, for individual defections cannot as easily endanger the viability of the government. Under such circumstances, politicians have less leverage with which to force concessions. *An electoral system which provides for some measure of administrative continuity and limits the power of politicians to corrupt civil servants and to loot are important considerations for countries concerned with implementing development policies and with safeguarding their scarce resources.*

Poorer countries should thus consider carefully the impact of electoral systems on their development potential. What is more democratic is not necessarily better for the development of the country. This seems to be amply borne out by the large number of military dictatorships and one-party political systems which in so many newly independent countries have eliminated democratic electoral systems patterned too closely on those of the West, largely because they led to administrative chaos and political looting. Thus a surfeit of democracy – and some systems of proportional representation surely provide extreme forms – often contains the seed of its own destruction.

It may be argued that there are other forms of Proportional Representation than the pure party list system employed in Italian national and local elections. The P.R. system used in Malta is often mentioned as an ideal form. This is Proportional Representation with the single transferable vote. Besides in Malta, it is also used in national elections in the Republic of Ireland and Tasmania. Enid Lakeman has argued that this system of P.R. tends to pro-

duce only a few parties each of which contains a range of public opinion (1970). Because a voter in this P.R. system, in contrast to a party list system, can vote for individual candidates within the same and other parties, he can influence the composition of government in a way that is impossible in most electoral systems.

I agree with her that this form of P.R., as compared to the party list system, does produce relatively few parties, and thus relatively stable government. Maltese and Irish political history bear this out, especially when compared to the rapid succession of multi-party governing coalitions that have characterized post-war governments in Italy, and for example, the Netherlands. (No less than 20 political parties competed in the 1973 Dutch elections, and the governing coalition, formed only after three months of political horse-trading, consisted of five parties whose colours varied widely). But as a result of the deals made between the candidates themselves for their 'second preference votes', the choice a person has in theory to vote for a variety of individual candidates is often manipulated away (Bax Chapter 6; Boissevain 1965: 131).

Furthermore, although Miss Lakeman enumerates the virtues of the single transferable vote form of P.R., she nowhere indicates that it strongly fosters patronage, subversion of civil servants, internal rivalry and factionalism within the parties. It does this by pitting candidates from the same party against each other in multi-member constituencies. There a candidate or a sitting member of parliament *vies with other candidates from his own party in the same constituency* for the allegiance of the same voters. Rival candidates from the same party are usually his worst enemies. As John Whyte noted in discussing the problems of a Dail Deputy, he cannot outbid them by offering a more attractive policy, because they are all bound by the same party programme. The only way he can outdistance them is by building up a greater reputation as a worker for his constituents (1966:19).

Pressure on him to perform services for both voters and for civil servants, who must provide the prizes his electors seek, is intense. The immense pressure on civil servants to provide the contracts, jobs, transfers, licences, scholarships, and so on that competing politicians from the governing party require to satisfy their constituents must not be underestimated. This corrupting influence

is inherent in the Maltese and Irish form of P.R.

Duverger wrote many years ago that 'it is curious to note that the only countries in which the Fascist tendency has succeeded in finding corporate expression in parties represented in parliament are countries with proportional representation.' (Duverger, 1963, p. 255). This I suggest is not only because P.R. makes it possible for such parties to gain representation, as Duverger argues, but also because P.R. through favouring multi-partism and government by coalitions favours the very conditions (weak leadership, government instability, party factionalism, corruption, looting and maladministration) which totalitarian parties promise to cure through the application of a 'strong hand'.

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