

# **A Panacea for Local Government? The Role of PR**

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## Executive Summary

With proportional representation (PR) being introduced into Britain at the regional, European and possibly national level, there is increasing interest in the role that PR might play in revitalising local democracy. This Briefing analyses the likely effects of introducing PR for local government elections, and the compatibility of PR with the rest of the government's agenda for modernising local government. The main findings are:

- Compared to the existing first past the post system, PR will increase party competition and opposition representation in local government and will reduce the incidence of one-party states.
- Most forms of PR reduce the constituency/member link; but the impact of this reduction would be less marked than introducing PR at a national level, because most local government wards already have more than one councillor.
- PR in most forms is incompatible with the government's proposal to introduce annual elections. The increase in ward size necessitated by a move to PR could be minimised by using existing multi-member wards, or combining two such wards. If annual elections are introduced, this option no longer exists. PR should therefore be considered before, not after, a change to annual elections is introduced.
- PR is likely to make councillors more responsive to the needs of their electorate. The presence of opposition members in significant numbers, and the increased possibility that the ruling party could lose office may incentivise councillors to take their electorate more seriously.
- It is not possible to say with certainty what effect, if any, PR will have on the effectiveness of councils. Although hung councils are more likely under PR, the evidence is inconclusive as to whether hung councils deliver a better or worse service.
- Hung councils place increased demands on councillors. This may act as a disincentive to citizens thinking of standing for council. This effect could be corrected by reforming the committee structure or introducing directly elected mayors. The choice of electoral system for a directly elected mayor limits the choice of electoral system for councils. Electoral reform therefore needs to be considered alongside and not after a decision to move to a mayoral model.
- PR is unlikely to significantly increase the turnout in local government elections. Factors such as the introduction of weekend voting, postal ballots or the re-siting of polling stations seem likely to have a greater effect.
- Although women are better represented at a local than national level, they are still significantly under-represented. This may be due more to the reluctance of women to stand for election than to the electoral system. PR itself is unlikely to significantly increase the representation of women in local government.

## Introduction\*

Ever since John Stuart Mill, campaigners in Britain have been pressing the merits of proportional representation (PR). It is likely in the next few years that these efforts will finally bear fruit. PR is being introduced for European elections, the new devolved assemblies in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London. And is being considered by the Jenkins Commission for Westminster elections. Further ahead, a reformed House of Lords which contained an elected element might also adopt some form of PR. This Briefing assesses the case for reform of the voting system in local government.

That local government needs reform is widely agreed. Official reports (the Maud Committee in 1967, the Bains Committee in 1972 and the Widdicombe Committee in 1986), semi-official reports, (such as the Audit Commission's aptly titled *We Can't Go On Meeting Like This* (1990)) and independent studies (e.g. the Commission for Local Democracy (1995) or pamphlets such as Tony Blair's *Leading the Way - A new vision for local government* (1998)) all conclude that the internal structure of local government requires change.

Furthermore, there is broad agreement that the key question is that asked in the recent Green Paper *Modernising Local Government*: how can local "councils once again engage with and more effectively lead their local communities."<sup>1</sup> Change is needed to enhance:

- the representation of the citizen
- responsiveness and accountability
- effectiveness in decision making
- the vision and leadership shown by councils
- electoral turnout.

Finally there is an unusual degree of consensus regarding the need to reform councils' internal structures. Change is required to the way councillors work and to the kind of people who become councillors. Structurally, the committee system is seen as increasingly inadequate. Allied to this is the need for a clearer distinction between the executive and representative role of councillors. It is hoped that a more clearly defined executive will increase council responsiveness and accountability. Additionally, those councillors freed from executive responsibilities will be able to focus upon their representative role, concentrating upon calling the executive to account. To this end there is growing interest in the possible role of directly elected mayors.

In the words of Tony Blair: "Making the executive distinct, separate and fairly rewarded and supported will help to attract more people of calibre into leadership positions. And making scrutiny the prime backbench function will cut the inordinate number of hours spent deliberating on

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\* The following provided helpful and useful comments on a earlier draft of this Briefing, although none is responsible for any views or errors contained in it: John Curtice, Katy Donnelly, Patrick Dunleavy. Steve Leach, Dave Lee, Colin Rallings, Gerry Stoker, Michael Temple, Michael Thrasher.

<sup>1</sup> *Modernising Local Government* (1998) 1.21

committees. So local people who want to contribute to their local community by standing for public office will know that they can do so without signing half their life away."<sup>2</sup>

Of the most frequently mentioned reforms, the one that has been most conspicuously left off the Government's list is electoral reform. Although PR featured in earlier drafts, in the final version of its Green Paper the Government explicitly declined to endorse it: "The Government believes that changes to the voting system are not a panacea for the current weaknesses in local government. Reforms to the electoral, political and consultation arrangements discussed elsewhere in this document are of greater importance and urgency."<sup>3</sup> In the subsequent White Paper the Government reaffirmed its view that "local government modernisation is more fundamental than simply changing how people cast their vote." Its stated intention is to await the Jenkins Commission's report and the subsequent referendum verdict and then "assess the implications for local government."<sup>4</sup>

However, with PR being introduced to Scotland, Wales and London and to the European level of government, it is unlikely that the pressure to introduce PR in local government will cease. This Briefing will examine the case for electoral reform in local government, its compatibility with other proposed reforms, and the arguments for and against different electoral systems at the local level. Whilst we agree that electoral reform is not a panacea, it does not follow that other reforms are more urgent. A coherent approach to local government reform may require that electoral reform is considered alongside, and not after, other changes.

Most of the debate about PR has considered its likely impact at the national level. In considering what the potential impact of the introduction of PR would be for local government, it is important to distinguish between those effects that are intrinsic to PR and so would necessarily apply at the local level (e.g. proportionality, changed constituency size), and those that are extrinsic, relying upon the way people vote, and will not automatically apply to local government (e.g. coalitions).

It is important also to be sensitive to the factors that may be closely influenced by the nature of the electoral system (e.g. the representation of parties, the responsiveness of councils to voters), and those that have a far weaker relationship with the electoral system (e.g. the quality of leadership in local government). It should also be noted that different PR systems will have a varying impact on such issues as proportionality or women's representation.<sup>5</sup>

## **Representation of the Citizen**

There are two ways in which PR could be more representative than first-past-the-post (FPTP). Firstly, it could be more substantively representative (p6) so that votes are more closely translated into councillors: under PR a party that gets 30% of the vote would be expected to get around 30% of the seats. Secondly PR could be more descriptively representative than FPTP (p8). This means

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<sup>2</sup> Blair, T., *Leading the Way - A new vision for local government* (London: IPPR, 1998) p17

<sup>3</sup> *Modernising Local Government* (1998), 3.47

<sup>4</sup> *Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People* (1998), 4.26–4.27

<sup>5</sup> Appendix A discusses women's representation under PR, Appendix B distinguishes the main forms of PR

that the composition of councillors elected under a PR system could more directly reflect the population as a whole. This could be measured in terms of age or ethnicity, but is most commonly considered in relation to gender balance.

### ***Substantive representation***

In national elections the quirks of FPTP are well-documented and have provided much of the impetus for electoral reform. At the last general election, for example, Labour nationally received a 179 seat majority with only 44.4%. In Scotland the Conservatives won no seats at all despite receiving 21% of the vote and the Liberal Democrats won 10 seats with 16% of the vote.

In local elections the disproportionalities have received less attention although they have been even more startling. In Knowsley in 1978, the Tories won only two seats on 43% of the vote,<sup>6</sup> whilst in Islington in 1990, Labour received 94% of the seats with 49% of the votes and in Croydon, four years later, it benefited from a 10 seat majority despite polling 4% less than the Conservatives.<sup>7</sup> The Labour Party has not been the only beneficiary of FPTP, for in Richmond in 1990, the Liberal Democrats won 92% of the seats with the support of 46.5% of the voters, and in Bracknell Forest in 1987, the Conservatives won all 40 seats on the council with just 55% of the vote.

The introduction of PR would end this high degree of disproportionality, boosting the representation of opposition parties in local government. This does not mean that 'hung' councils (those where no one party has a majority) are an inevitable result, but it means that there is likely to be a significant opposition presence in all councils. A recent study in Scotland concluded that "the most typical result of electoral reform would be an increase in pluralism and scrutiny within the council chamber rather than changes in outright control of local authorities."<sup>8</sup> Assuming that PR itself caused no change to voting patterns, 13 out of the 29 Scottish mainland councils would remain under one party control: but the size of the majority might be smaller. In Glasgow, for example, Labour would get three fifths of the seats for its 61% of the votes, not 93% as at present. The 13 other councils currently under single party control would become hung.

From this brief analysis we can see that the introduction of PR in local government would:

- increase the number of opposition councillors in most councils
- increase the number of hung councils
- reduce the number of 'one-party states' (defined as those where a single party has 80%+ of the seats)
- increase the number of councils vulnerable to a small swing.

What are the implications of these changes?

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<sup>6</sup> Rallings, C., and Thrasher, M. *Local Elections in Britain* (New York: Routledge, 1997) p 192

<sup>7</sup> Adonis, A., and Twigg, S., *The Cross we Bear: Electoral Reform for Local Government* (London: Fabian Society, 1997) p3

<sup>8</sup> Adonis, A., *Voting in Proportion: Electoral Reform for Scotland's Councils* (Edinburgh: Scottish Council Foundation, 1998) p11

## ***The end of one-party states***

It is widely believed that PR, by boosting the representation of the opposition in council chambers will increase the responsiveness of both councils and councillors.<sup>9</sup> Under FPTP, the argument goes, too many councillors have been able to take their electorate for granted with safe seats and minimal opposition. In the words of two leading observers of the UK local government scene: "Accountability currently fails by allowing too many local parties to believe that they will enjoy a permanent majority on the council regardless of the quality of services they deliver. Such an atmosphere leads to complacency by the governing party, disillusion on the part of the hopelessly under-represented and outnumbered opposition, and encourages apathy amongst the electorate."<sup>10</sup>

The effect of PR is to align more closely each party's share of the vote with its share of seats. Dominant parties will no longer gain from the 'multiplier' effect of the FPTP system, where a small increase in vote share produces a dramatic increase in the number of seats. This in itself should boost the responsiveness of the parties, since the elections will become more closely fought, with fewer 'safe' seats available. A proportional electoral system may also produce more responsive councils, since even those local authorities run by a single party may be vulnerable to a small voting swing. In Scotland, long seen as a Labour stronghold, Labour's highest share of the vote was in North Lanarkshire, and that was a high but not impregnable 62%.<sup>11</sup>

However, this is to move from the direct effects of PR (closely fought elections as a result of a closer vote:seat ratio), to the activities of the parties under a PR system. Parties can respond in a host of different ways. One possibility would be for two or more parties to form 'semi permanent' coalition potentially making themselves as unmovable as one-party states under FPTP, although it might be that such coalitions would be less stable than one-party states because of the possibility that one party could defect. PR also encourages coalition partners to campaign for as many seats as possible, in order to maximise power within the coalition. This factor might be assumed to increase the responsiveness of the parties even if, once formed, coalitions may be difficult to remove from power.

In assessing how far PR promotes voter responsiveness among the parties, we should distinguish between the different schemes on offer. Voter responsiveness is more likely to be promoted under a PR system which gives voters the power to decide which candidates get elected as well as which party. With closed list PR, a poor performing council leader may put himself at the top of the list and so be guaranteed re-election, whereas under an open list system or STV he is directly vulnerable to voter dissatisfaction. The fate of the controversial leader of Hackney Council in the May 1998 local elections illustrates the power and importance of retaining a direct link between voters and candidates. He lost his seat to a candidate from the Green Party despite Labour's success across the rest of the council.

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<sup>9</sup> One aspect of this - the effectiveness of service delivery - is analysed further in Appendix C

<sup>10</sup> Rallings, C., and Thrasher, M. *Local Elections in Britain* (New York: Routledge, 1997) p198

<sup>11</sup> Adonis, A., *Voting in Proportion: Electoral Reform for Scotland's Councils* (Edinburgh: Scottish Council Foundation, 1998)

There also seems to be a strong association between corruption and impregnability. As the Salmon Commission noted over twenty years ago: "The local authorities most vulnerable to corruption have tended to be those in which one political party has unchallenged dominance. Not only are such authorities at particular risk because of absence of an effective opposition which can scrutinise their decisions, but investigations and the making of complaints in such areas may be inhibited by the feeling that there is no way round the 'party machine'."<sup>12</sup> Fear of losing reduces the incentive to be corrupt and spells in opposition reduce the opportunity.<sup>13</sup>

It is not just fear of their voters that forces councillors to be responsive; it is the scrutiny of the opposition. In councils where the opposition has a token presence then it will be hampered in performing this task (although not completely disabled, for quality of opposition matters as well as quantity). Even if it had the number of councillors required, the demoralising effect of permanent opposition reduces the incentive to oppose.

Furthermore, in hung councils decisions need to be taken and justified in committee rather than caucus. This enforced openness enhances the incentive for councillors to take decisions in the general interest of their constituents rather than their own narrower party interests. The uncertainty of hung councils can reduce the power of local government officials who are unable to steer policy with the same confidence and are forced to leave more decisions to the committees.<sup>14</sup> Decisions taken by councillors rather than officers may be more responsive to constituent needs.

In summary, PR is likely to make local councils more responsive to the wishes of their constituents because:

- it increases the number of opposition members, which helps hold councils to account
- it may increase the chance of the ruling party being tipped into opposition, providing it with an incentive to reflect closely constituents' views in its programmes. However, PR may merely replace one-party rule with two party dominance
- the reduced likelihood of continuous periods of one-party rule may reduce levels of corruption
- decisions are taken in open committee and are thus more likely to be scrutinised
- more decisions are taken by councillors rather than local government officials

### ***Descriptive representation***

Tony Blair noted that "At present local councillors as a whole are not as representative as they could be of the communities they serve ... Only a quarter are women. And ethnic minorities are also under-represented."<sup>15</sup> Supporters of PR have long claimed a positive impact on the representation of women and ethnic minorities. Surveying women's representation in national

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<sup>12</sup> Cmnd 6524 [1976] para 39

<sup>13</sup> Although it should be noted that the District Auditor's report suggested that it was fear of losing that was the motivation for the corruption at Westminster City Council *The Guardian* (10th May 1996)

<sup>14</sup> Temple, M., *Coalition and Co-operation in Local Government*, (London: Electoral Reform Society, 1996)

<sup>15</sup> Blair, T., *Leading the Way - A New Vision for Local Government* (London: IPPR, 1998) p17

parliaments and the social and structural factors that might influence it, a recent study concluded that "the type of electoral system is still the most significant predictor."<sup>16</sup>

However, the effects of PR on the representation of women and ethnic minorities are more complex than many commentators allow not least because the needs and difficulties faced by women are not the same as those faced by ethnic minorities. An electoral system that helps the former may not enhance the representation of the latter. The discussion of this is at Appendix A.

The safest conclusions are:

- different PR systems have varying potentials to enhance under-represented groups
- of the common PR systems, STV is the least well placed to enhance representation of these groups
- there is no hard evidence of gender bias either amongst the party selectors or the voting public; the under representation of women may be as much to do with the reluctance of women to stand for election.

## **Responsiveness and Accountability of Local Government**

It is widely believed that local government should become more responsive to local people, and more accountable for its activities. The accountability of local government depends on a number of factors outside the scope of this paper, for example how far people vote in local elections on the basis of national, rather than local, issues (local council elections thus becoming "second order" contests). In assessing the relationship between accountability and a proportional electoral system, two significant issues are considered here: the first is the nature of the link between a councillor and his/her constituents; the second is the compatibility between different forms of PR and a key part of the Government's programme to strengthen accountability in local government, namely annual elections.

### ***Constituency links***

A system of PR based on multi-member wards is seen by its detractors as ending the strong link between MPs and constituents that they claim exists under FPTP. The Green Paper *Modernising Local Government* stresses this point. "The tradition in this country is for there to be a close link between constituency representatives and the citizens they represent. Our local government voting system delivers just this result with each councillor being elected by the citizens of the ward or electoral district that he or she represents. We believe that such close links between councillors and people are vital to ensuring councils engage effectively with their local communities."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> W Rule: *Electoral Systems, Contextual Factors and Women's Opportunity for Election to Parliament in Twenty-Three Democracies*, *Western Political Quarterly* [1987, 40] p494

<sup>17</sup> *Modernising Local Government* (1998) 3.45

This point is sharpest in relation to PR systems - such as STV or open lists - that are based on multi-member constituencies. Advocates of STV argue that these multi-member constituencies are a strength. Constituents have a choice of representatives and can turn to the one whose party affiliation they support or the one more likely to be sympathetic to their cause. Councillors have every incentive to serve their constituents well, because come the next election only a party's most popular candidates will be elected. STV, it is argued, reduces the complacency of sitting candidates.

Critics, on the other hand, say that the special link that councillors have with their constituents cannot apply in multi-member constituencies. This may be true, but in England over two thirds of wards are already multi-member with typically three councillors per ward. The loss in switching from FPTP to STV would be that involved in moving from three member constituencies to five. On the other hand, in many rural areas, some single member wards are already geographically extensive, reflecting the low population densities. Creating multi-member wards might be unpopular locally since it would involve joining areas that may feel that they have little in common with each other. This would be more problematic under AMS than STV. Whilst both involve increased ward sizes, AMS retains single members whilst the enlarged STV wards would be multi-member. Thus, under STV, local candidates could still be elected solely on the strength of support in the part of the ward in which he/she is best known.

An alternative criticism of STV is that it leads to councillors, aware that they will have to compete for votes at the next elections with other candidates from the same party, paying too close an attention to their constituents. If councillors are supposed to take a strategic role, pursuing policies that are in the interests of the council as a whole, then this might be problematic. If, on the other hand a councillor's primary purpose is to represent the interests of his constituents, then this becomes a virtue, rather than a vice, of STV. Reforms to the structure of councils with a clearer split between the executive and the legislative functions would clarify what councillors' primary role should be.

In summary:

- a change to PR will alter, and in some cases remove, the existing constituency link
- this is likely to be a particular problem in rural areas where population densities are low
- most wards are already multi-member so the switch would not be as great as making a similar change at national level
- STV provides an arguably stronger link between councillors and constituents than FPTP
- the value that should be attached to a strong constituency link varies depending upon whether councillors are perceived as having a primarily strategic or representative role.

### ***PR and annual elections***

The Government's General Election manifesto stated that "To ensure greater accountability a proportion of councillors in each locality will be elected annually." The Green Paper suggests that annual elections will "significantly improve accountability. The electorate gets a chance every year

to give its verdict on the performance and the policies of its local authority."<sup>18</sup> However, unless there is a change of electoral system, for too many councils these elections are a forgone conclusion. Certainly many of the councils that have been accused of corruption and complacency in recent years (e.g. Hull, Doncaster) are those where annual elections already take place.

Further advantages of annual elections it is argued are that they increase continuity and stability, and reduce the opportunity for governing parties to time difficult decisions around the electoral cycle. Annual elections also force parties to campaign almost continuously which keeps them in touch with their voters.

On the other hand annual elections may encourage 'short-termism' and could result in frequent changes in control. Elections by thirds can also frustrate the wishes of the voters since a party can retain control despite winning no seats at the most recent election. For example in May 1998 Labour would have retained control of 24 out of the 32 metropolitan boroughs it held, even if it had lost all the seats it was defending.<sup>19</sup> The salutary effect of such a loss, however, should not be underestimated, and voters might appreciate the opportunity to send a warning to their council without seriously endangering control.

Frequent elections also seem to depress turnout. Voters become wearied by constant elections<sup>20</sup> and they seem to prefer the opportunity to remove the whole council rather than to vote in circumstances where no change may be possible. The arguments for and against annual elections, in other words, are finely balanced. As Rallings and Thrasher note "Many of the arguments on either side boil down to a matter of judgement or even prejudice!"<sup>21</sup>

The White Paper *Modern Local Government* noted the 'mixed' response that proposals for annual elections had received (and drew specific attention to the problem of voter fatigue). However the Government remained unpersuaded that the disadvantages of annual elections outweighed the advantages and proposed that unitary councils have elections by thirds for a four year term with the fallow year being used for other elections (e.g. the Greater London Authority). In two tier areas, the Government proposes to achieve annual elections by electing half the council in each tier in alternating years.<sup>22</sup>

A difficulty with annual elections that was not noted in either the Green or White Papers is that they are incompatible with some forms of PR. For STV, for example, to be proportional, voters need to be choosing a minimum of three councillors per ward. If these councillors are to be elected annually by thirds, then the minimum ward size will be nine councillors. For a more proportionate

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<sup>18</sup> *Modernising Local Government* (1998) 3.2

<sup>19</sup> Rallings, C., and Thrasher, M., *The implications of universal annual elections for English local government* (paper prepared for the Local Government Commission, 1998) p6

<sup>20</sup> Crewe, I., *Electoral Participation* in Butler, D., et al *Democracy at the Polls: A Comparative Study of Competitive National Elections*, (Washington D. C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1981)

<sup>21</sup> Rallings, C., and Thrasher, M., *The implications of universal annual elections for English local government* (paper prepared for the Local Government Commission, 1998) p6

<sup>22</sup> *Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People* (1998), 4.9–4.13

result with five vacancies a year, the ward size increases to fifteen. This would make wards too large.

It seems unlikely that AMS, which is the form of PR chosen for elections to the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, could be made compatible with annual elections. It would require multi-member constituency seats and a complex reworking of the additional members. AMS already requires a relatively large elected body to ensure that there are enough 'additional members' to ensure a high level of proportionality. Many councils are too small for this anyway<sup>23</sup>. If elections took place by thirds - as proposed by the Government for unitary authorities - the difficulty would be tripled, and in all but the very largest councils proportionality could not be achieved.

Alternative electoral systems (e.g. the Additional Vote and party list models) can work with annual elections, so a commitment to annual elections is not incompatible with electoral reform. However, the logic of list PR seems diluted with annual elections by thirds. If party A has 60% of the seats in a council and party B receives 60% of the vote at the election, party B will not get 60% of the seats in the new council, but only 60% of the 33% of the seats being contested. That is it will get 21% of the seats from its 60% of the vote, plus whatever seats it already had. Arguably, this scenario will do little to increase the legitimacy of elections.

In summary, the main advantages of annual elections are:

- it could lead to increased accountability with councils continually focused on their constituents' needs
- it reduces the opportunity for shirking difficult decisions or timing them around the electoral cycle.

The main disadvantages of annual elections are:

- they might encourage short-termism amongst councillors
- they appear to depress turnout and might frustrate voter choice
- they are incompatible with some alternative electoral systems.

## Effective Decision Making

Introducing PR would be likely to increase the number of councils that are hung; what impact would this have on the quality of policy making? One argument put forward is that hung councils produce better decisions than non-hung councils, since they allow the committee system to function more effectively.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Adonis, A., *Voting in Proportion: Electoral Reform for Scotland's Councils* (Scottish Council Foundation: Edinburgh, 1998) p14 notes that four councils in Scotland have under 20 members (but recommends AMS over STV for Scotland anyway)

<sup>24</sup> Temple, M., *Coalition and Co-operation in Local Government*, (Electoral Reform Society: London, 1996) c.f. Blowers, A., *The Consequences of Minority Rule in an English County* *Local Government Studies* 13:5 (1987)

One of the potential advantages of the committee system is that all decisions are debated fully by councillors and are taken with the help of experienced local government officers. As the Audit Commission noted, in a generally critical report, "The strengths of the committee system should not be neglected: it opens up decisions to public scrutiny and ensures that officers and contractors remain accountable for their performance."<sup>25</sup> In theory, therefore, the committee system ensures more openness than under a cabinet-style decision making process, where decisions are taken in private and may thus be driven more by narrow party considerations.

In non-hung councils, power resides not with the committee but with the caucus of the leading party.<sup>26</sup> Decision making in caucus is more secretive, and does not usually involve any input from council officers. Under this model, the committees play a weaker role in scrutinising policies than in situations where the council has hung status.

In hung councils the power of the caucus is reduced. In those councils with formal coalitions, decisions may be taken by a small leadership group, but in many decisions are taken on a case by case basis in committee: "In some hung councils, committees have become genuine decision making forums because no one party can guarantee a majority."<sup>27</sup>

Decision making by committee might be more open and allow greater scrutiny, but it also often entails a more lengthy decision making process.<sup>28</sup>

We should note that the experience of policy making in hung councils varies between councils. In some local councils, members and officials felt that the quality of decision making suffered, because unstable coalitions made policy formulation difficult. Others felt that the more inclusive nature of a hung council produced the reverse effect. A recent survey concluded that "Decision-making is undoubtedly more protracted; even supporters of the new ways of working admit this, one going so far as to comment on the 'exhaustion of the members'."<sup>29</sup> But the same survey noted that only 18% of officers, and 29% of party leaders, thought that the decision-making process had, on balance, deteriorated (see Table 1). Furthermore, there is some evidence to suggest that as councillors and officials have more experience of hung councils, they evolve new ways of coping, so that operations improve over time.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Audit Commission *Representing the People: The Role of Councillors* (1997) p3

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p9

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p9

<sup>28</sup> "The Widdicombe researchers found that councillors and officers were in general agreement that 'hung' councils had led to increased workloads for everyone. Much more time is spent in preparation for meetings, since any party group may be in a position to influence decisions; council and committee meetings are taking longer and have to be more conscientiously attended because they have become genuine arenas for taking decisions; and more decisions are taken to full committee as the chair's freedom of action has become more limited." (Barron, J., et al *Councillors in Crisis? The public and private worlds of local councillors* (Macmillan: Basingstoke, 1991) pp74-5

<sup>29</sup> Temple, M., *Coalition and Co-operation in Local Government*, (Electoral Reform Society: London, 1996), Audit Commission *Representing the People: The Role of Councillors* (1997)

<sup>30</sup> Rallings, C., and Thrasher, M., *Local Government Chronicle* (28.1.1994) pp16-7

**Table 1 - Impact of hung councils on policy and decision making process<sup>31</sup>**

(a) Chief executives

Judgement on quality of policies made	Percentage	Number replying
Deteriorated	10%	12
Remained same	34%	41
Improved	39%	47
No response	17%	20

(b) Party leaders

Judgement on quality of policies made	Percentage	Number replying
Deteriorated	28%	30
Remained same	16%	17
Improved	48%	52
No response	-	-

(c) Chief executives

Judgement on quality of decision making	Percentage	Number replying
Deteriorated	18%	21
Remained same	41%	47
Improved	28%	32
No response	13%	15

(d) Party leaders

Judgement on quality of decision making	Percentage	Number replying
Deteriorated	29%	32
Remained same	14%	15
Improved	49%	53
No response	8%	9

These figures suggest that in this sample of councils, both party leaders and chief executives thought that policies and decision making had improved more than they had deteriorated. But because of the varied experiences of councils and the importance of local factors, it is not possible to state with certainty that hung councils will always produce more effective decisions.

<sup>31</sup> source: Michael Temple (Staffordshire University). Bar charts giving these figures are in Rallings, C., and Thrasher, M., *Local Government Chronicle* (28.1.1994) pp16-7

## Vision and Leadership in Local Government

It is widely believed that many councils and councillors are failing to fulfil their leadership potential. Two main factors have influenced this: the people providing that leadership and the institutional structure within which they work. The latter is the subject of vigorous policy discussion: a split executive-back bench model - potentially incorporating a directly elected mayor - is a prime option put forward by reformers. The Government's view is that there should be a range of structures so that councils can adopt the one most suited to their size and type.<sup>32</sup>

Having adopted the Supplementary Vote (SV) for the Mayor of London, the Government suggests that it would be sensible to adopt a similar system for electing mayors elsewhere.<sup>33</sup> However, if mayoral elections are to take place on the same day as council elections (as with the Mayor of London and the Greater London Authority) then the choice of SV limits the electoral system that may be chosen for the council. Because it is important the ballot papers for the two elections be compatible with each other, and because SV is an X voting system (see Appendix B) then the council must be elected on AMS or List PR.<sup>34</sup> FPTP could also be retained as a compatible system.

Whatever form of election is chosen for a mayor, the coupling of that with a PR system for the council makes it likely that the mayor will have to negotiate his or her policies through a hung council. A negative implication is that this raises the possibility of gridlock whilst, on the positive side, it is likely to force mayors to adopt a more consensual style of governing. The exact implications of this will depend upon the division of powers between the mayor and council. Were the council elected under FPTP then it is more likely that the mayor would be from the same party as that dominating the council.

What impact might PR have on the other issue raised as influencing leadership: the quality of people in local government? The calibre of candidates in local elections has been a recurrent concern, and with few women and young people standing, councils are drawing on a reduced pool of potential talent. Furthermore, the high level of voluntary councillor retirement means that many experienced councillors are lost.<sup>35</sup> Supporters of electoral reform claim PR would help by providing greater opportunities for female and ethnic minority candidates, thus broadening the pool from which potential leaders could be drawn.<sup>36</sup> However, the exact link between the size of the pool and the quality of decision making in local councils is difficult to determine.

On the other hand, PR may be thought to have a negative impact on the quality of people putting themselves forward for council. One of the main reasons, studies suggest, that potential councillors are put off standing for election is the amount of time involved in being a councillor: an average of

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<sup>32</sup> *Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People* (1998), 3.17

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.36

<sup>34</sup> Dunleavy, P., and Margetts, H., *Improving Electoral Accountability in Local Government: The Main Options* (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, forthcoming)

<sup>35</sup> *The Turnover of Local Councilors*, Joseph Rowntree Local and Central Government Research, Paper 15, Jan 1992

<sup>36</sup> This claim is discussed in Appendix A

74 hours a month.<sup>37</sup> For supposed part-timers, this is a large commitment to fit in alongside a working and family life; hence the disproportionate number of councillors who are retired.

In hung councils, which are likely to be a more frequent occurrence under PR, the demands on councillor time may increase. Officers tend to be less certain as to what council policy is, referring more decisions to councillors.<sup>38</sup> In committee, the decision making process can become very drawn out with every item on the agenda subject to a full debate. It is plausible to argue that the effect of PR - in making hung councils more likely - would serve to exacerbate the time commitments of councillors, and thus deter potential candidates from standing.

Were the introduction of PR to be combined with other proposed reforms of local government, then this problem might no longer apply. The long overdue reform of the committee system and a stronger executive model could counterbalance the tendency of PR to increase the demands on councillor time.

In summary:

- decisions about introducing directly elected mayors need to be taken alongside decisions about electoral reform for council elections
- there is little evidence to suggest that PR would improve the quality of people putting themselves forward as candidates
- hung councils, which are more likely under PR, probably increase the time demands on councillors, which is likely to further deter potential candidates. This tendency could be countered by reforms to the committee system.

## Turnout in Local Elections

Supporters of PR claim that because it is a 'fairer' voting system, which means that every vote counts, this boosts voters' interest in elections and enhances turnout. It also increases the incentives for parties to fight every seat. PR should avoid situations such as that in Wales where, in 1995, only four out of the 22 unitary authorities had every seat contested, and over 100 Labour councillors were returned unopposed.<sup>39</sup>

Certainly, low turnout at local elections has been a recurrent concern. Tony Blair himself noted that "Britain comes bottom of the European league table for turnout in local elections"<sup>40</sup> (see Table 2) and pledged to do something about it. The local elections in May 1998 hit a new low with average turnout at just 26%.

<sup>37</sup> Audit Commission *We Can't Go On Meeting Like This: The changing Role of Local Authority Members* (1990)

<sup>38</sup> Temple, M., *Coalition and Co-operation in Local Government*, (London: Electoral Reform Society, 1996) p45

<sup>39</sup> Deacon, R. *The 'Particular Problem with Democratic Legitimacy'... The 1998 Welsh Local Government Review* (paper presented to the 1998 EPOP Conference at Manchester Business School)

<sup>40</sup> Blair, T., *Leading the Way - A new vision for local government* (London: IPPR, 1998) p2

**Table 2 - Average Turnout in Recent Sub-National Elections<sup>41</sup>**

Luxembourg	93%	Portugal	60%
Sweden	90%	Israel	57%
Australia (compulsory states)	85%	Netherlands	54%
Italy	85%	New Zealand	53%
Belgium	80%	Poland	43%
Denmark	80%	Great Britain	40%
Germany	72%	Australia (optional states)	35%
France	70%	Canada	33%
Spain	64%	USA	25%
Ireland	62%		

Studies on the structural factors affecting voter turnout have failed to reach clear conclusions on what weight to accord to each, although the presence of proportional representation is thought by many to be one of the most significant indicators.<sup>42</sup>

There are, however, numerous additional factors. These include the level of canvassing, the average distance of voters from polling stations, size of wards, and the level of media attention. The government hopes to increase turnout by concentrating on these latter factors, rather than adopting PR: "We should consider new ways of making it easier for people to vote, including placing polling booths in shopping malls, holding elections entirely by postal ballot and voting at weekends."<sup>43</sup>

If the aim of reform is simply to boost electoral turnout, then it is likely that these other reforms will have a greater effect than changing the voting system. In New Zealand, for example, the introduction of postal voting for local elections doubled turnout,<sup>44</sup> whilst the most detailed study of the impact of PR on turnout, suggests that it only produces an increase of between 5% and 7%.<sup>45</sup> A survey for the Department of the Environment concluded that the presence of so many secondary factors means that "there seems little scope for guaranteeing an increase in turnout simply by changing the electoral system and electoral arrangements to which local councils are subject."<sup>46</sup>

However, low turnout is generally seen as symptomatic of a wider malaise in local government, and raising turnout is not an end in itself. Rather, it will be one of the ways in which the success of any local government reform will be judged. Thus, if PR is to be adopted for local government, it must be on the strength of more than its impact upon turnout.

<sup>41</sup> Rallings, C., Temple, M., Thrasher, M., *Community Identity and Participation in Local Democracy*, CLD report I, 1994, p18

<sup>42</sup> Blais, A., and Carty, R., *Does PR foster voter turnout?* European Journal of Political Research 18 p.p. 167-81 (1990)

<sup>43</sup> Blair, T., *Leading the Way - A new vision for local government* (IPPR: London, 1998) p2

<sup>44</sup> Rallings and Thrasher: *Enhancing Local Election Turnout* [1996]

<sup>45</sup> Blais, A., and Carty, R., *Does PR foster voter turnout?* European Journal of Political Research 18 p.p. 167-81 (1990)

<sup>46</sup> Rallings, C., and Thrasher, M., *Explaining Election Turnout: a secondary analysis of local election statistics* (HMSO: London, 1994) p25

## Conclusion

The Government is right to argue that PR should not be seen as a panacea for local government. The problems of local government run too deep to be solved by a simple change in the electoral system.

This in itself, however, is not an argument against electoral reform. PR will help with some problems, but on others its impact is likely to be neutral, or it may make matter worse. The main benefit of PR is that it should remove the problem of one-party states, which will increase the perceived legitimacy of local government and may improve its responsiveness. Two other areas claimed as benefits but where we believe that PR is unlikely to make an impact are achieving a greater representation of women and improving the quality of decision making. Finally, there is one area where PR may exacerbate current difficulties, by deterring citizens from standing as councillors, because of the additional time commitment involved.

More importantly, as this Briefing shows, the other aspects of the Government's reform programme for local government (such as annual elections or directly elected mayors) would, once implemented, reduce the options for electoral reform. Since it is more likely that the current reforms of local government will last if they are coherent, the Government should consider the possibility of electoral reform in tandem with the rest of the programme rather than postponing a decision.

## Appendix A - PR and the Representation of Women

It is widely believed that PR increases the representation of women and ethnic minorities in legislatures.<sup>47</sup> Thus the leading constitutional commentator, Vernon Bogdanor, is able to state "with a striking degree of confidence" that PR enhances the representation of women.<sup>48</sup> Although there seems to be some evidence to back this up, this is not as conclusive as is commonly thought. Furthermore, there is no reason to assume that the factors that explain the under-representation of women, and the reforms best placed to correct this, are the same as those that would help ethnic minorities.<sup>49</sup> This appendix will consider the relationship between women's representation and PR. The statistics, at first glance, seem to support the orthodox view. David Farrell calculates the average level of women legislators in 25 mainly Western countries to be 16.9%, and within that PR systems have almost twice as many women as non-PR systems (20% and 10.4% respectively).<sup>50</sup> However, these statistics are distorted by the four Nordic countries included in the sample, all of which use PR, where the average level of women's representation is 37.9%. Once these countries are excluded (and excluding three countries whose systems are neither PR-based nor FPTP) the differences are less marked. On this basis, the average level of women legislators in PR countries is 13.65% compared with an average for FPTP countries of 12.3%. Worldwide, according to calculations derived from Inter-Parliamentary Union figures,<sup>51</sup> and excluding the distorting effect of Scandinavia, women's representation in parliaments elected under FPTP is 8.9% and those under PR is 11.7%. The relationship between PR and women's representation is negligible compared to the regional variations.

This should not be surprising since it simply does not follow that an electoral system that more accurately translates votes into party seats could, by this very property, increase women's representation. To understand how PR might affect women's representation it is necessary to consider how any electoral system could have such an impact.

The effect that a particular electoral system could have on women's representation rests on the two possible explanations for women's under-representation in parliament (assuming that women choose to stand in the first place): firstly that women candidates are unpopular with voters; secondly that party elites discriminate against women, being reluctant to put them on the ballot paper.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> The data below concerns the representation of women in national legislatures and it should be borne in mind that the conclusions may not translate directly across to the sub-national level. For example, women's representation starts at a higher level in local government with almost 30% of councillors being women compared to under 20% of UK MPs.

<sup>48</sup> Bogdanor, V., and Butler, D., (eds.) *Democracy and Elections: Electoral Systems and their Political Consequences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p248

<sup>49</sup> Rule, W., and Zimmerman, J., (eds.) *United States Electoral Systems: their impact on women and minorities* (New York: Praeger, 1992) p67

<sup>50</sup> Farrell, D., *Comparing Electoral System*, (London, New York: Prentice Hall / Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1997) p152

<sup>51</sup> available at <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>

<sup>52</sup> Duverger, M., *The Political Role of Women* (Paris: UNESCO, 1955)

If voters do discriminate against women, the advantage closed lists have over STV or FPTP is that voters do not elect a candidate but can only vote for a party. If Party A gets 13% of the vote in region Z then it will get (approximately) 13% of the seats. If this translates into five seats then the top five candidates on the party's list for that region will be elected.

Because there is no direct link between voters and candidates, the voter has no opportunity to express a bias against women. This contrasts most obviously with FPTP's single member constituencies where a voter who disliked women would have the opportunity not to vote for a woman candidate. Although STV has multi-member constituencies, voters still vote directly for a candidate and so also have the opportunity to express any bias. In some ways STV is worse than FPTP because under the latter a supporter of Party A faced with a woman candidate would have to choose between his party beliefs and his gender bias. Under STV where a party would typically stand two or three candidates per constituency a voter might be able to choose between male and female candidates of the same party.

Furthermore, lists arguably inhibit party elites in expressing their perceived bias against women. Because they are forced to present a slate of candidates (rather than just one per constituency as in FPTP<sup>53</sup>) this makes them more likely to select mixed teams of candidates so as to widen their appeal. A slate containing no women would exhibit a very obvious bias. Furthermore, since candidates may be listed in order of preference a party which tried to confine women to the bottom half of the list would be immediately exposed. A similar bias under FPTP (confining women to marginal seats) would be less visible.

Again, however, these advantages apply to list PR rather than STV. Since parties only stand two or three candidates per constituency under STV systems, a bias against women is less obvious. Furthermore parties brief their supporters on how to spread their preferences (if all three candidates got a third of first preference votes for that party, none might be elected) and it would be entirely appropriate for a party to ask its supporters to favour a specific (male) candidate. If a woman is a party's third preference then unless the constituency is such that a party is likely to get at least three candidates elected, her presence on the ballot will make no difference. This is why the evidence suggests that to have a significant impact on women's representation a voting system needs to have List PR's large district magnitudes: "As the number of representatives in constituencies increases, the percentage of the vote needed for election diminishes ... [women] have a greater chance for election when the district magnitude is high."<sup>54</sup> Seven members per district seems to be the level at which an impact begins to be made.<sup>55</sup>

The major difficulty with arguments that PR will improve the gender balance of legislatures is not the lack of structural explanations as to how this happens but that there is simply no evidence that either voters or party elites are biased against women. Since Duverger, survey after survey has searched for and failed to find evidence of discrimination. For example, Ekstrand and Ekert's

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<sup>53</sup> although many local government wards have three members so that any benefit that multi-member wards would bring already applies.

<sup>54</sup> Rule, W., *Electoral Systems, Contextual Factors and Women's Opportunity for Election to Parliament in Twenty Three Democracies* Western Political Quarterly (1987) pp478-9

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

experiments with experimental voting situations showed that "for the total voting population there is no evidence of any effect of candidate's sex on voter choice."<sup>56</sup> They noted with surprise that even 'conservative white religious fundamentalist male' voters showed "no significant bias against female candidates." Darcy and Schramm's analysis of congressional voting demonstrated that the sex of the candidate made no difference.<sup>57</sup>

Furthermore, there is no indication that party elites discriminate against women. Indeed research suggests that the reverse is the case with most Western political parties positively favouring women candidates. At the very least the "lack of evidence for elite discrimination, despite considerable efforts to find it, shifts the burden of finding evidence to those who believe it still persists."<sup>58</sup> Even Rule who provides much of the evidence for the positive impact of PR is forced to conclude that "once women had decided to seek nomination for, and election to, state legislatures, they were not disadvantaged relative to male candidates."<sup>59</sup>

If parties do positively favour women then there is an advantage to list PR since it facilitates parties listing their candidates in the order they wish them to be elected. Practices such as zipping (that is, ordering men and women alternately on closed lists) can ensure that women achieve equal representation in parliaments. This seems to be the most that can be said for PR.

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<sup>56</sup> Ekstrand, L., & Eckert, W., *The Impact of Candidate's Sex on Voter Choice*, *Western Political Quarterly*, 34, 1981, p82

<sup>57</sup> Darcy, R., & Schramm, S., *When Women Run Against Men* *Public Opinion Quarterly* 4 (Spring 1977) pp.-12

<sup>58</sup> Darcy, R., *Electoral Barriers to Women*, in Rule, W., and Zimmerman, J., (eds.) *United States Electoral Systems: their impact on women and minorities* (Praeger: New York, 1992) p 222

<sup>59</sup> W Rule: *Why Women Don't Run*, *Western Political Quarterly*, 34, 1981, p61

## **Appendix B - The Main Electoral Systems**

### **First-Past-The-Post (FPTP)**

This is the system currently used at Westminster, and in all local authorities except in Northern Ireland. Each constituency or ward elects single candidates, or a number of candidates in multi-member wards (the electoral system in the latter case might more accurately be described as multi-member plurality). Voters mark an X next to the name of their favoured candidate(s), and the candidate(s) with the most X's wins. In a seat with a large number of candidates, the winner may have only minority support - thus the Liberal Democrats won Inverness at the 1992 General Election with only 26% of the vote, Labour coming second with 25.2%, the SNP third with 24.7% and the Conservatives fourth with 22.6%. Under FPTP, there is no requirement for a candidate to secure a set proportion of votes.

### **The Alternative Vote (AV)**

AV uses the same constituencies as FPTP but voters rank candidates in order of preference. Voters number the candidates rather than using Xs. If no candidate receives a majority of first preference votes, the second preferences of those who voted for the bottom placed candidate are redistributed. This process continues until one candidate has an absolute majority.

### **The Supplementary Vote (SV)**

This is similar to AV, but voters mark an X in a first preference column and an X in a second preference column. If no candidate has a majority of first preferences then the second preferences of those who voted for all but the top two placed candidates are redistributed. The candidate who has the most voters after this redistribution is declared the winner. This is the system chosen to elect the Mayor of London.

### **List Systems**

A List System will operate for elections to the European Parliament from 1999.<sup>60</sup> In closed list systems the successful candidates will be those who are placed high enough on their party's list to qualify for one of the seats that their party has won. Open lists systems allow voters to express preference between a party's candidates. Seats are still allocated on the basis of the percentage vote received by each party (voting for a candidate counts as voting for his or her party) but if a party is entitled to five seats, those will be allocated to the five candidates who received the highest personal vote, and not, as in closed lists, to the five candidates placed highest on the list. It is closed lists that facilitate zipping (the alternation of men and women candidates) because the order of candidates cannot be changed by the voters.

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<sup>60</sup> this is discussed in more detail in *Elections under Regional Lists: A Guide to the New System for Electing MEPs* (London: The Constitution Unit, 1998)

### **Additional Member System (AMS)**

This system is a hybrid system combining elements of list and FPTP-type systems. Voters have two votes. Firstly, they vote for a constituency member under FPTP, AV or SV. With their second vote they vote for a party. The second vote is used to determine the total number of seats allocated to each party. The number of constituency seats each party has is topped up so that their allocation of seats matches their share of the party vote. Thus, if party A has 10 constituency seats in a 100 seat chamber (i.e. 10%) but received 15% of the list vote, they will be allocated 5 additional seats for the top five candidates on their party's list.

### **Single Transferable Vote (STV)**

In multi-member constituencies, voters rank candidates in order of preference. A quota is drawn up to determine how many votes a candidate needs to be successfully elected. If a candidate has more votes than are required to fulfil the quota their surplus votes are reallocated to his or her voter's second choice candidate. This process continues until all surpluses have been re-distributed. Should this fail to fill all the vacancies, then the least popular candidate is eliminated and his or her votes redistributed. This process then continues until all the vacancies are filled.

## Appendix C - One-Party States

One effect that the introduction of PR in local elections will have is that it will reduce the number of councils where the opposition have only a token presence: “there is no system of PR which could deny Labour control in Glasgow ... and nor should it. **However one-party states would be a thing of the past.**”<sup>61</sup>

However, although there may be reasons on grounds of fairness or democratic legitimacy to object to such imbalance it is difficult to demonstrate that they should also be objected to on grounds of operational effectiveness.

Paul Lashmar and Richard Oliver have taken the Audit Commission’s annual Performance Indicators for councils and used these to calculate performance league tables for Unitary, District and Metropolitan Councils.<sup>62</sup> Combining these figures with those for one-party states,<sup>63</sup> the 31 one-party states in Unitary councils are on average ranked higher in terms of performance than those without such dominance. They are, however, well spread throughout the table, with three in the top ten, including the overall winner, South Tyneside and three in the bottom ten. By way of contrast, one-party states in District Councils are less well spread through their league table, comprising none of the top ten, but half of the bottom ten. Overall they perform less well than District Councils whose political control is less dominated by a single party.

It has been suggested that the one-party state mentality is a reflection not only of the number of opposition representatives, but also the length of time that single party control persists.<sup>64</sup> The two are not synonymous; of the 91 councils (20% of the total) that are currently one-party states (including 5 that have no opposition members at all), only eight were one-party states in 1978 (and two of those were then dominated by a different party!). Only 55 councils have remained under one party rule for twenty years (not all as one-party states); but once again these councils are evenly spread through the performance league tables and include South Tyneside, which tops the table.

This should not be taken as suggesting that one-party rule should not be a cause for concern. Particularly amongst the District Councils the one-party states seem to perform worse than those where there is a more significant opposition presence. But the picture is more complex, varied and interesting than the headline criticisms of one-party states like Hull might suggest.

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<sup>61</sup> Adonis, A., *Voting in Proportion: Electoral Reform for Scotland's Councils* (Scottish Council Foundation: Edinburgh, 1998) p10. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>62</sup> *The Observer*, 3 May 1998

<sup>63</sup> taken from Leach, S., *The Democratic Deficit in Local Government* (London: Local Government Management Board, forthcoming) where one-party states are defined as those where one party has 80% or more of the seats.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*