

Political behaviour under proportional representation

New forms of political management structures involving separate executives and, in some cases, elected mayors will be introduced in local authorities throughout England and Wales over the next two years. This study examined the likely impact on this agenda of the subsequent introduction of proportional representation (PR) in local government elections and the feasibility of effective cabinet/mayoral government in 'hung' authorities (i.e. authorities with no overall control). It found that:

- f** Under the form of PR most likely to be introduced – the Additional Member System – the proportion of hung local authorities in Great Britain is likely to rise from the current level of 34 per cent to between 60-65 per cent under present patterns of party support.
- f** Currently around 85 authorities (just under 20 per cent) are dominated by one political party. The evidence suggest that, under the current system, there is a danger that cabinet government in such authorities will lead to less public debate and less effective scrutiny of key decisions and forms of local representation.
- f** Academic evidence since 1981 has shown that at best, hung authorities can operate as effectively as majority-controlled authorities, with the added bonus of more open decision-making and political debate. At worst, they have been fragmented, slow-moving, inconsistent, rancorous and difficult to manage. However, since the early 1990s the number of adversarial hung authorities has declined.
- f** The Government has been encouraging local authorities to establish cabinet-style government in advance of legislation. Hung authorities have been less proactive in responding to this than majority-controlled authorities. However, increasing numbers of hung authorities are now responding and have developed workable cabinet models.
- f** There is an increasing move towards partnership administrations in hung authorities, particularly between Labour and Liberal Democrat groups. The introduction of cabinet government is likely to increase the pressure for coalitions to be formed.
- f** The researchers conclude that the introduction of PR would increase the number of hung authorities. However, hung authorities could operate cabinet or mayoral government as effectively and more democratically than councils dominated by one party.

The policy context

New political management structures

The Local Government (Organisation and Standards) Bill, currently at its committee stage, includes provisions to introduce new forms of political management structures into local authorities in England and Wales. All local authorities will be required to choose between three different decision-making models, all of which involve separating powers between an executive and an assembly along the familiar lines of the national government system. The three models are as follows:

- A directly elected mayor with a cabinet;
- A cabinet with a leader;
- A directly elected mayor with a council manager.

The main tasks of the **executive** will be to:

- represent the authority and its community's interests to the outside world;
- build coalitions and work in partnership with all sectors of the community, including the business and public sectors;
- ensure effective delivery of the programme on which it was elected;
- prepare policy plans and proposals;
- take decisions on resources and priorities;
- draw up the annual budget.

The main tasks of the **assembly or council** will be to:

- agree the authority's overall community strategies and development plans;
- determine each year the capital and revenue budgets;
- take decisions which represent a departure from previously agreed strategies and budgets;
- make or confirm chief officer appointments;
- scrutinise the performance of the executive.

It is likely that local authorities will be expected to introduce these new arrangements by May 2002. In the meantime, increasing numbers of authorities are introducing forms of cabinet government within the constraints of the existing legislation.

Proportional representation

Proportional representation (PR) has now been used in the elections for the Scottish and Welsh Assemblies, and to elect the Mayor and members of the Greater London Assembly. In Scotland and

Wales, the Additional Member System has been used: under this system, 50 per cent of members are elected on a first-past-the-post constituency basis, whilst the remaining 50 per cent are elected on a list system. The same system was used to elect Greater London Assembly members, whilst the Mayor was elected through the Supplementary Vote System. Although there are currently no specific plans to introduce PR into other local government elections, it is quite possible this might happen over the next five years.

Problems with the present system

The current first-past-the-post voting system in local government elections often results in major discrepancies between the proportion of votes cast and the proportion of seats parties win on the council. In 14 London boroughs one party has majority control – and in several instances near dominance – on the basis of a minority of votes at the most recent set of elections.

In Newham in 1994 and 1998, Labour won every single seat with well under 60 per cent of the vote. In 1998, the same party won over 90 per cent of the seats in Haringey and Lewisham with votes of 52 per cent and 56 per cent respectively.

Among the 32 London boroughs, the research found that no fewer than 23 (72 per cent) have experienced continuous (at least 20-year) periods of one-party control, with five having been permanently run by the same party since 1964. Among the Metropolitan boroughs, the picture is very much the same. Inflated majorities resulting in long periods of effectively unchallenged one-party rule can often generate a sense of complacency in the dominant party, with electoral success regarded as a foregone conclusion.

All three of the major 'non-majoritarian' PR systems would substantially reduce the disproportion between votes cast and seats gained. All would ensure that effective opposition was feasible across the country. The number of councils dominated by one party would become negligible.

On the basis of the most recent elections, up to two-thirds of London boroughs and half of all Metropolitan borough councils would be hung under the Additional Member System. Over England and Wales as a whole, the study estimates that between 60 and 65 per cent of all authorities would be hung. In all the remainder there would be a numerically significant opposition.

The growth and nature of hung authorities

There are currently 145 hung authorities in Britain, one-third of all authorities. Over the past ten years the proportion of hung authorities has fluctuated between 25 and 35 per cent. Hung authorities are thus a well-established and significant feature of the local government landscape under the first-past-the-post system.

Academic evidence since 1981 has shown that, at best, hung authorities can operate as effectively in terms of speed and consistency of decision-making as majority-controlled authorities, often with the added bonus of more open decision-making and political debate. At worst, however, they can be fragmented, slow-moving, inconsistent, rancorous and extremely difficult to manage. Since the early 1990s, stable integrated hung authorities have become more common. At present, fragmented hung authorities probably form no more than 10 per cent of the total. This trend reflects the growing rapport between Labour and Liberal Democrat groups at local level; this in turn reflects a degree of common ground in policy terms and the improved relationship between the parties at national level.

The move towards cabinet government will be likely to lead to more coalition cabinets, particularly in the foreseeable future between Labour and Liberal Democrat groups.

Hung authorities' response to government agenda

The Government has been encouraging local authorities to establish cabinet-style government in advance of the legislation. Hung authorities have been less proactive in responding to this than majority-controlled authorities. However, increasing numbers of hung authorities are now responding and have developed workable cabinet models. The proposals of those that have responded emphasise the following features:

- A mix of one-party, two-party and all-party cabinets;
- A preference for open rather than closed cabinet meetings;
- The introduction of area committees as an important check on the power of the cabinet.

Neither of the elected mayor options has engendered any significant degree of support. However, public referendums may oblige authorities to adopt this

system; in this case, the elected mayor plus council manager option would be likely to have an appeal for less party-politicised hung authorities.

The impact on hung authorities of the new legislation

In assessing the extent to which the new political management arrangements can meet the Government's objectives in introducing them, four important criteria need to be applied:

- Effective community leadership;
- Capacity for effective scrutiny;
- Capacity for effective local representation;
- Quality of decision-making (speed, consistency, accountability, openness).

Although community leadership will be more straightforward in authorities with majority control, there is no reason why it cannot be equally effective in most hung authorities. Similarly, although decision-making processes may be more convoluted in hung authorities, most are likely to make decisions as quickly, consistently, accountably and openly as majority-controlled authorities.

The study suggests that hung authorities are likely to be more effective in relation to scrutiny and local representation than majority-controlled councils. Analysis of the likely political dynamics in different political situations suggests that hung authorities are more likely to relax group discipline so as to enable members of all parties to play effective scrutiny and local representation roles.

Indeed, there are real dangers that authorities dominated by a single party will not permit effective scrutiny and local representation; the dominant group may choose not to relax group discipline sufficiently to facilitate these roles. At worst, cabinet or mayoral government in a one-party dominated authority could operate in an enclosed and secretive way, with a minimum of public debate, in a system where these balancing forces of scrutiny and local representation are ineffective.

Conclusion

- On the evidence of this study, the introduction of cabinet/mayoral government is not likely to prove problematic for most hung authorities. Many are likely to opt for two-party administrations, particularly if the current pattern of Labour/Liberal Democrat co-operation continues. But workable one-party and three-party cabinet models are also

possible. In all cases, the strong probability that hung authorities will remain in the long term will strengthen the pressure to make the new system work.

- This strengthens the argument for PR, as hung authorities would be more likely under this form of voting. Hung authorities now have a long track record of effective operation. Some hung authorities will remain adversarial and difficult to manage under the new system but they are likely to be the exception. The vast majority would make the new forms of executive government work. This would avoid the dangers of cabinet/mayoral government in authorities dominated by one party, which would remain a feature of local government if the electoral system were to be unchanged.
- In a 'top-up' PR system, there would be a distinction between councillors directly elected from local (ward) constituencies, and those elected through a top-up list-based system. Evidence from overseas suggests that the latter are not viewed as inferior in status; indeed, members of party leadership groups are often elected through the list system. In British local government, there would be a greater congruity of electoral systems with the new political management arrangements if top-up members were elected for the local authority area as a whole, rather than for large sub-authority constituencies.

About the study

The study's methodological approach involved:

- Analysis of the academic literature on the behaviour of hung authorities between 1981 and the present day.
- Analysis of local election results in London boroughs, metropolitan districts and shire districts between 1974 and the present day, plus an assessment of the impact of the introduction of the Additional Member System of PR on the most recent electoral results, in each case.
- Interviews with chief executives and (in four cases) political leaders in nine hung authorities (covering a range of authority types and different relative

patterns of party strength) to elicit more subjective evidence as to attitudes to the new cabinet/mayoral agenda, initiatives which had been proposed, and experience with transitional forms of cabinet government (where applicable).

How to get further information

The full report, **Hung authorities, elected mayors and cabinet government: Political behaviour under proportional representation** by Steve Leach and Chris Game, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 902633 76 8, price £12.95).