

AV could be the wedge that splits the coalition

The Tories are right to insist on redrawing the electoral map if we are to have voting reform.

1

The Government will announce tomorrow its intention to hold a referendum on May 5, 2011, to decide if there should be a new voting system for the UK. The proposed method is the alternative vote (AV) system. This allows voters to rank candidates in order of their preference and is in common use in private clubs, such as the Oxford and Cambridge Union debating societies. AV is comparatively rare in national electoral systems, perhaps because it takes longer to count and may create administrative complexities. It is not necessarily more proportional than the existing first-past-the-post system.

2

The Electoral Reform Society has calculated what might have happened if the 2010 general election had been based on AV. The Conservatives might have had 281 MPs instead of 307; Labour 262 instead of 258; the Liberal Democrats 79 instead of 57. Of course, these are only rough estimates as no one knows what second preferences would have been recorded. Some claim that a real AV election would produce a quite different voting pattern. However, the Electoral Reform Society's estimates have had considerable impact on the Conservatives. If the last election had been held under AV they might have won 26 fewer seats and the Lib Dems might have won another 22. The Lib-Con coalition was able to be created only because those two parties had 364 seats between them, an overall majority of nearly 80. The alternative Lab-Lib coalition could not be made to work because those two had only 315, 10 less than an overall majority --- arithmetic is decisive.

3

These forecasts have made Conservatives very nervous about AV. They see the Lib Dems, who are likely to be the main beneficiaries, as a left-of-centre party. Tory voters can be expected to give most of their second preferences to the Lib Dems, and Labour voters are likely to do the same. Conservatives fear that introducing AV could lead to a succession of Lib-Lab coalitions, which would normally be able to secure an overall majority. Polls tend to show that Lib Dem voters do usually prefer a centre-left coalition with Labour to a centre-right coalition with the Tories. If there is to be a referendum in May the Government will have to carry a referendum Bill through Parliament. That will be subject to amendment and will have to be carried by both Houses. So far, the Lords have

been regularly defeating the Government in the first votes of the new Parliament. The Lords could carry amendments that the Government found difficult to reverse --- peers cannot be taken for granted.

4

The date of the referendum will be one contested issue. On May 5 Scotland and Wales will hold elections for their Parliament and Assembly; in England there will be only local council elections. The turnout for local elections is usually lower than it is for the Scottish and Welsh elections. The English already have reason to object to the unequal nature of the proposed referendum. On September 11, 1997, Scotland had a referendum that established the devolution of the Scottish Parliament. Only Scottish voters had a vote. On May 5, the English electoral system would be decided by UK votes on a day when Scottish voters are more likely than the English to go to the polls.

5

Yet electoral reform is also likely to cause resentment in Scotland. Voters there will find that they will have fewer seats in the Westminster Parliament because Scottish constituencies will be redistributed to bring them in line with larger electorates South of the Border. There will also be a 10 per cent cut in the number of seats throughout the UK as part of the redistribution. Scotland and Wales will suffer a double whammy --- the merger of smaller electorates and the loss of 10 per cent of all UK constituencies.

6

For the Tories, redistribution could provide their main electoral compensation. The Government has indicated that AV --- even if it is carried --- will not be introduced before the redistribution has taken place. The Conservatives believe that more equal electorates will take away the undoubted advantage that Labour has enjoyed in recent elections. Some Conservatives fear that the Lib Dems may leave the coalition as soon as the referendum has been held, to force the first AV election as soon as they can. It is in the Conservative interest that there should be a clause in the Bill to postpone AV until the redistribution is completed. AV plus redistribution is the real Conservative proposal.

7

The creation of the coalition has put new anxieties into all the parties. Perhaps the Conservatives have the most difficult problem, although they have most seats. They know that many Lib Dems continue to regard them as the real enemy. The Conservatives fear that they may have created the electoral conditions for a Lib-Lab coalition, which many Lib Dems would greatly prefer. The Lib Dems are afraid that the prize of electoral reform may

be snatched away from them. Neither partner is sure that the other will not withdraw from the coalition at a time that best suits itself. There is no sentimental trust between these parties.

8

Most Conservatives hope that the referendum Bill will be carried, but that AV will be rejected by the voters. That would leave the Lib Dems feeling that they had not got what they hoped for. It would have little impact on Labour, but for the Conservatives it would be a relief from a real threat.

AV COULD BE THE WEDGE THAT SPLITS THE COALITION

A. Read the text and write down the numbers of the paragraphs next to the corresponding headings below:

- a) Double setback for Scotland and Wales. _____
- b) The date for the referendum results in controversy. _____
- c) The conservative party's views on the AV. _____
- d) The likely outcome of the AV for the past elections. _____
- e) The coalition poses drawbacks for the conservative party. _____

a b c d e

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B. Now, after reading the text in detail, choose the right options for each prompt:

1. The AV system

- a. is commonly used in some CEE countries.
- b. poses several practical problems.
- c. is known to bear more degree of proportionality.

2. According to the Electoral Reform Society, the most benefitted party would have been

- a. the Conservatives.
- b. the Labour party
- c. the Liberal Democrats

3. *In order for the coalition to be able to be set up*

- a. the Conservatives need to get 307 seats.
- b. the Liberal Democrats are required to obtain 57 seats.
- c. the two parties need to get approximately a majority of 80 seats.

4. *Conservatives are not in favour of AV because*

- a. most voters would be expected to vote for the Labour party as their second choice.
- b. most voters would be expected to vote for the Lib Dems as their second choice.
- c. it could lead to a series of Lib-Con coalitions.

5. *The Lords*

- a. can never be relied upon.
- b. have the right to alter and amend the Referendum Bill.
- c. have recently made it difficult for the Government to pass laws.

6. *Scottish voters don't feel very happy about the electoral reform since*

- a. the latter involves the merging of smaller constituencies.
- b. AV will be wiped out.
- c. the coalition is planning to carry out a 10% cut of all UK seats.

7. *The Tories, on their part, welcome the reorganization of constituencies because*

- a) they would like AV to be introduced as soon as possible.

- b) they fear that the Liberals may leave the coalition.
- c) it will prevent Labour from obtaining as many seats.

8. The Conservative party regard the coalition with mixed feelings since

- a) it has put new anxieties into all three parties.
- b) they consider they may have paved the way for other cross-party coalitions to be set up.
- c) The Labour Party consider them to be their enemy.

9. The Liberal Democrats

- a) are afraid of being robbed of their possible advantage.
- b) believe there is no emotional trust between parties.
- c) are certain to withdraw from the coalition.

10. The Conservatives' wildest dreams would be

- a) for the redistribution to be held.
- b) for AV to be discarded while redistribution takes place.
- c) for AV to be applied.

1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
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C. Search the text for one or several words that correspond to the following definitions:

³⁵/₁₇ order; choose (paragraph 1): _____

³⁵/₁₇ approximate values (paragraph 2): _____

³⁵/₁₇ correction; modification (paragraph 3): _____

³⁵/₁₇ number of people attending a public event (paragraph 4): _____

³⁵/₁₇ passed; approved (paragraph 8):
