

The English people believes itself to be free; it is gravely mistaken; it is free only during election of members of parliament; as soon as the members are elected, the people is enslaved; it is nothing. In the brief moment of its freedom, the English people makes such a use of that freedom that it deserves to lose it. – Jean Jacques Rousseau, The Social Contract

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News that James Forder was publishing a book arguing against electoral reform must have been badly received by the intellectual wing of the Liberal Democrats – assuming there is, or ever was, such a thing.

In his 1999 split volume *Both Sides of the Coin*, Forder eviscerated (that is not too strong a word) the case for British entry into European Monetary Union. As well as laying out the wider case against, Forder in passing demolished the pro-entry argument as put forward in the same book by Chris Huhne. Back then, Huhne was an MEP for the Liberal Democrats, the only major party in Britain ever publicly committed to EMU. Today, Huhne is Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, thanks to the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition deal struck last May – a deal which guaranteed the Lib Dems a referendum on switching to the Alternative Vote (AV) at general elections. Back in 1999, Liberal Democrats must have hoped as few people as possible read the Forder-Huhne volume. If they're brave enough to pick up *The Case Against Voting Reform*, they'll be thinking exactly the same today.

Forder's stated and unambiguous aim is to defend the present system of "First Past The Post" (FPTP) as an entirely superior electoral system not just to AV – previously dubbed a "miserable little compromise" by none other than Nick Clegg – but to all forms of Proportional Representation (PR) too. His strategy is to consider the advantages of FPTP *vis-à-vis* PR, on the justified assumption that nobody actually wants AV. (It is, on all measures, a worse system than either FPTP or PR, as indeed both reformists and their opponents were happy to admit prior to the referendum announcement last May.) Forder notes – rightly – that those now campaigning for AV are doing so either because of a mistaken belief that it is closer to PR than the present system, or on the hope that a successful "Yes" vote will open the door to a subsequent vote on PR-proper. The bulk of argument, therefore, is dedicated to advocating FPTP over PR. Insofar as that succeeds, AV is doubly damned: both by its own failings, and by those of its supposedly superior PR alternative.

The foundation of Forder's argument, however, rests in a particular conception of democracy, or more fundamentally, of politics itself. His intervention can only be understood and assessed by first appreciating that conception; for although he is a professional academic economist, Forder has a sharp eye for the workings of the political. And this is fitting, because the most obvious intellectual debt in this short yet powerful volume is to another academic economist with a sharp eye for the political: the Austrian-born American émigré, Joseph Schumpeter.

The vision of democratic politics which Schumpeter put forward, and which Forder explicitly endorses, is a direct rejection of the sort of view associated with the quote of Rousseau's I began with. Rousseau's most famous idea – at least in its popularised version (the properly-understood version is rarely appreciated, not least by Schumpeter himself) – posits "the people" as voting to determine a "general will". This "general will" binds the citizens in a harmonious unity and prescribes the true

laws which all agree to be governed by, even if they actually voted the other way. Obedience to the collectively-determined general will allegedly guarantees freedom via self-government. Thus Rousseau's most infamous dictum: that extracting the obedience of a citizen dissenter "means nothing less than that he will be forced to be free".

Schumpeter explicitly attacked and rejected this Rousseauist vision of democracy. Concepts like "the people" and "the general will" were (Schumpeter thought) both conceptually incoherent and empirically unsustainable. Against the Rousseauist vision of democracy as harmonious self-legislation and collective emancipation, Schumpeter put himself firmly in line with the thinking of another of the 20th century's great German-speaking intellectuals, the sociologist and political thinker Max Weber. Specifically, Weber championed what he termed the Principle of Small Numbers: "that politics is always rule by minority elites". Schumpeter agreed entirely. A brute fact of all human organization, he thought, is the eventual necessity of organizational hierarchy and leadership, and in particular the need for control and direction. Whatever egalitarian set-up we may start with, a combination of personal self-aggrandizement and the necessary division of labour within political and economic society guarantees that in the end a *few* will rise to rule the many. What matters is both how the few get to be in charge, and in turn how (if at all) they are controlled.

For Schumpeter, what marked democracy out was that it was a particular mechanism – albeit an extremely impressive and efficient one – for selecting and controlling the minority elites who would inevitably vie for political control: a way of regulating "the competitive struggle for power and office". Crucially, on Schumpeter's view individual voters did not collectively constitute "a people", and they did not form a "general will". They remained different individual voters who attempted to select different *leaders*, who could then be entrusted with power – or if necessary, stripped of it. In all of this, the charismatic appeal of individual leaders who are able to sway enough of the electorate was irreducible and usually paramount (here Schumpeter follows Weber closely – Forder, to his sharp-eyed credit, less so):

"Voters do not decide issues. But neither do they pick their members of parliament from the eligibly population with a perfectly open mind. In all normal cases the initiative lies with the candidate who makes a bid for the office of a member of parliament and such local leadership as that may imply. Voters confine themselves to accepting this bid in preference to others or refusing to accept it."

Schumpeter's is a starkly deflationary view of democracy, where voters are confined to handling an instrumental mechanism for picking leaders from a self-selecting and self-promoting minority elite. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is a deflationary view actively despised by many. In political science departments across the globe, scores of scholars working typically on "democratic theory" or more specifically on "deliberative democracy" valiantly attempt either to deny the adequacy of Schumpeter's account for the real world, or decry its endorsement of Weber's Principle of Small Numbers as a stunted present aberration that must be transcended. Forder, by contrast, is quite happy with the basic Schumpeterian diagnosis. And the nasty rub for the anti-Schumpeterians is that Forder appears to have reality on his side.

According to what considerations do voters select amongst candidates at British general elections? Some different models are available. Voters might see MPs as delegates, who trundle off to Parliament to represent their constituents views. But

this is plainly not what actually happens, nor could it ever happen for as long as MPs represent more than one constituent, and are members of political parties with manifesto commitments and policy positions. Alternatively, voters might select MPs as agents who deliberate in the Chamber in order to formulate legislation. But again, this is manifestly not what happens: British legislation is handed down by the Government for its majority in the legislature to ratify, without there ever being any real debate of the sort that actually changes party voting lines. So, are voters then voting on the *policies* put forward by the parties? Certainly this has more potential. But the problem is, no voter ever seriously endorses *all* the policies of any one party, and indeed none but the worst of political anoraks will know more than a handful of each party's policies. At best, voters opt for one party's overall *package* of policies, when compared to that offered by the others.

Forder is unhesitating in his correlate conclusion: the most plausible account of what voters are actually voting for at general elections is the appeal of party *leaders*. Certainly, part of the appeal of competing leader will lie in their promises to implement their party's package of policies. But following the successes of Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair, then the spectacular failure of Gordon Brown but lukewarm reception of David Cameron (which ended in the first hung parliament for 40 years), it is undeniable that party leaders are what matter most come election time. This conclusion only becomes more forceful when coupled with the general ignorance of most voters, who are far more likely to know the name of a party leader than their own incumbent MP.

All of which is nothing to be disconcerted by, especially on a Schumpeterian outlook. Leaders are indispensable, and will always emerge in the end. If one is committed to *democracy* as a form of government (and Forder unambiguously is), it is obviously better if *voters* are picking leaders (rather than shady backroom deals between professional political animals). And indeed it is quite sensible for voters to focus on leaders, rather than specific party policies or individual MPs. As Forder notes (here he follows Weber), whatever the pretensions of party activists, the purpose and function of mature political parties in established democracies is to promote and support their leader in the hope that he or she gains power. If successful, the leader can distribute the spoils of victory downwards, and even carry out some of the policies that loyal activists have campaigned on and in some instances even believed in. But without a charismatic leader able to win the hearts of the people, a political party is dead in the water. As Forder wryly observes, in the final instance parties are "parasites" who depend on the success of their leaders over time in order to survive. When voters pick leaders, they are also picking *party bosses*; the top dogs who get to decide whether the advertised package of policies really will get implemented or not.

Unfortunately, the truth about politicians – and *especially* about successful politicians who make it to the top – is that they are power-hungry egomaniacs with delusions not only of grandeur but of their own infallibility. (This, by the way, is not a vacuous insult. It is just a fact that *anybody* who makes it to the top in politics will need to possess those sorts of qualities in order to beat off the competition and keep going through all the set-backs and defeats, the denigrations and compromises.) Above all, given the nature of power and the multiple opportunities for its abuse, all politicians need to be *controlled*. And the beauty of electoral democracy is that it offers an extremely effective way of controlling them: the carrot-and-stick of re-election.

The promise of potential re-election (which all politicians and their parties crave) keeps politicians mindful of what the voters will tolerate, and thus moderates

them in office. Correspondingly, when politicians go beyond the pale – and particularly when leaders fail outright – in democratic systems voters can kick them out. And this really matters. Indeed, it matters so much that Forder gives general elections a suitably melodramatic name: The Day of Judgment.

Having laid his Schumpeterian ground, Forder's argument is ready to bite. For we must recognise that The Day of Judgement – the most powerful and important feature of electoral democracy as a system for choosing and rejecting governments – is that it can take many forms, but not all of them are equally good. Forder's contention is that, on balance and in a necessarily imperfect world, FPTP is a superior mechanism for administering The Day of Judgement than PR can ever hope to be.

The main reason for thinking this that Forder puts forward revolves around the threat of permanent coalition that all forms of PR guarantee. In the regular (and boring) ding-dong between electoral reformists and their opponents, it is typical to hear the anti-reformists decry the “instability” and “weak government” that attends coalition. Forder, however, has little truck with these arguments. For a start, they are easily countered by examples of stable and strong government from Germany and elsewhere. His focus on the undesirability of regular coalition is different.

Firstly, Forder draws attention to the possibility of parties (particularly smaller ones) staying in power for decades despite having only minority shares of the vote because they are able to successfully cut deals with larger parties at each negotiating round. This is clearly an offense to the principle – surely a *democratic* principle – that voters, not political hustlers, get to decide who stays in government. For minor parties in particular, the trick to staying in Government is likely to be doing little or worth but remaining valuable to bigger coalition partners – thus defying the outcomes selected by actual voters. Yet this is only the least of Forder's worries.

Many advocates of PR claim that a virtue of such systems is that they encourage “compromise” and “consensus” between parties. When left at a level of vague generality this suggests a sort of placid niceness, a counter to the Punch and Judy idiocy of Prime Minister's Question Time. But Forder encourages us to look a little deeper; to notice that conflict and confrontation is the sign of a *healthy* democratic political system. After all, if there is a clear opposition party distinct from the government, whose aim is to wholesale replace the present administration, then that opposition has every incentive to scrutinise the present government and hold it to public account. This, in turn, should make for better government and a better opposition keen for the winner-takes-all prize of single party rule. By contrast, if permanent coalition is the norm, all parties have an incentive to meliorate their criticisms and avoid exposing the failings of their opponents – sections of whom might one day soon be their partners. Healthy democracies with high standards of accountability do not run on consensus, they run on conflict. FPTP unambiguously delivers more on this front than PR can – and that is a virtue not a vice.

Yet for Forder the really damning fact about coalition is the necessity of evasive dishonesty it ensures. Coalition makes it virtually impossible for voters to judge what parties will actually do in power before being elected, and to judge them on their record once they've spent time in office. This is because coalition necessitates compromise between parties – and as a result, coalition agreements *must* trump manifesto commitments. Although Vince Cable was widely ridiculed when he claimed that the Lib Dems did not break any promise on raising tuition fees because that promise only applied to the eventuality of a *majority Lib Dem government* whereas the Lib Dems only raised tuition fees as part of a *coalition government*, Forder argues that we should accept the impeccable logic of Cable's position. After

all, because coalition always demands compromise, nothing a political party says before an election can be held against its name when it rules in partnership. Manifestos become, at best, indicative of *potential* policies – and even then especially opaque ones, because parties must keep their cards close to their chests when negotiating with their rivals-cum-partners. As a result, PR drastically reduces the ability of voters to effectively administer The Day of Judgement. Parties cannot be judged on their manifestos nor on their records, because everything is pinned to a coalition agreement which, *ipso facto* and by virtue of a new election having been called, is already confined to history. Voters are disempowered to punish or reward parties, and in particular their leaders, and the ability to form and conduct government shifts to the politicians who are supposed to be controlled by democratic arrangements. If we believe in democracy – in power for voters – then this is a particularly unsettling result for PR to deliver.

Forder's key point here – and it is not to be overlooked – is that when comparing PR to FPTP, we are not evaluating whether one system is “more democratic” than the other. Democracy is a complex thing, and so are electoral systems; to claim one system is uniquely more “democratic” than another is just a piece of propaganda. Instead, we must assess systems on the basis of their various virtues and vices, for it is a brute fact of life that no electoral system is perfect. Forder's contention is that overall FPTP is a far better mechanism for administering The Day of Judgement than PR can be, because more often than not FPTP offers the chance for *voters themselves* to completely overhaul governments, punishing bad leaders and giving new ones a chance, with the warning that the same fate can await them too if they misbehave. As The Day of Judgement is *the* primary tool for selecting and controlling political leaders, this is a strong argument in favour of FPTP, at least for anyone sharing Forder's basic Schumpeterian outlook (an outlook which corresponds rather closely to the world we find ourselves living in). None of which is to say that FPTP is perfect. Forder readily acknowledges that it can be a capricious system, sometimes producing vexingly bizarre results, and not itself immune (as we have recently seen) to the vagaries of coalition. The point is that it is *less imperfect* than any system of PR promises to be. Given that we live in an imperfect world and will only ever have imperfect democracies, this is nothing to be sniffed at.

But an obvious question now arises: even if PR loses out to FPTP regarding The Day of Judgement, can it not be a better system *on balance* by exhibiting countervailing virtues which FPTP lacks? It is often assumed by electoral reformists that PR can deliver in many areas that FPTP cannot. Yet here too Forder must be reckoned with.

The most common argument heard for moving to PR is that it ensures “fairer votes” – but what does this actually mean? Frequently the pro-reformist camp will cite facts such as that the Liberal Democrats require 120,000 to secure one MP, whereas the Conservatives require only 35,000. Is this not manifestly unfair to Liberal Democrat voters? Whilst this appears to be an eminently straightforward thought, the problem is that “fairness” is a terribly vague concept and that as soon as we try and unpack it jack-in-the-boxes aplenty spring forth to cause trouble.

Forder offers a careful discussion of the underlying mathematical logic of preference voting systems, and how they are eventually *guaranteed* to generate outcomes which it becomes essentially impossible to designate as simply “fair” or “unfair”. This point is again important: “fairness” is a matter of many competing concerns, and no voting system can be simply designated “fair” *in vacuo* – we need

to know along what *dimension* of fairness it allegedly offers superior outcomes than others.

Yet one striking problem with PR and “fairness” does quickly arise: that the logic of “fair votes” cannot actually be completed on the very terms its advocates usually set forth. After all, why is it “fair” for one party to win, and another to lose? Or for that matter, for several parties to form a coalition which governs, and several other parties to be left out? After all, the left-out parties received many votes too. Should they not be entitled to govern, as well, albeit in proportion to their vote-share? If the premise of PR being “fair” is that more parties get to govern thus reflecting more voter preferences, why stop at only *some* parties? Surely, the conclusion of this line of reasoning with regard to “fairness” is that *all parties should be in government, all the time, proportionate to their vote share.*

Yet this is surely an untenable conclusion. If all parties are in government all the time, there is no opposition left to scrutinise and demand accountability, as well as there being very little possibility of viable and effective rule. Such a situation also destroys the possibility of The Day of Judgement. In short, it is nonsensical and the worst of all worlds – hence indeed even advocates of PR fall short of demanding government-for-all, instead introducing *anti-PR* checks into their own nominally PR systems (such as stipulating a 5% of the vote threshold to secure election). Forder thinks this illustrates the deeply wrong-headed nature of PR; better just to have the Day of Judgement via FPTP which (usually) turns-over governments quickly and decisively. If there must be winners and losers, better a relatively clean switch from one party and its leader to another, and not worry about the “unfairness” (whatever that means) of some voters being left unrepresented this time around.

According to Forder, then, the advocates of PR are defeated by their own logic – and deep down they already know it. Yet here he is actually at his weakest, and something (but I stress, only something) must be said in favour of PR. Namely, that there is nothing particularly wrong with accepting that there must be *some* point at which governments are selected and thus some parties excluded. PR proponents can justifiably reply that they are making the best of a bad situation and trying to make votes *as fair as possible*, even if – due to the imperfect nature of the world and of any electoral system – this is inherently limited in potential. And if Forder replies (as he surely would) “but what does *fair* mean?” the reformists do have an answer. It is the answer I once heard a woman at a packed Fabian Society event stand up and demand of Gordon Brown: when will all British citizens’ votes count *equally*, and not just if they are lucky enough to live in that third of Parliamentary constituencies which, as marginals, decide each and every election? Put differently: when will the communist in Kensington, or the Tory in Tyneside, be able to cast their ballot without it being a foregone conclusion that their vote is wasted because their candidate can never, ever win?

In fact, whilst this reply has a certain superficial plausibility – and, interestingly, it is not considered at all by Forder – upon closer inspection it actually does no good to the PR cause at all. But let us leave that until later, and consider first another major set of arguments typically put forward by advocates of PR: that it will increase the representation of minority groups and lead to more co-operative and constructive government.

In our age of equality and inclusion, many assume it can only be a good thing if more minority groups are given representation in political decision-making. But this is a complacent and naively optimistic assumption. For the problem with minority groups is that they are minority groups because they appeal to and serve *sectional*

interests. That, after all, is their function: if the main parties were catering to the relevant demand, there would be no need for minority parties. Yet in so catering to sectional interests, minority parties are likely to strike deals with larger coalition partners, but which disproportionately favour their narrow support base. It's hard to see what's "fair" about that. Furthermore, insofar as an opposition is fragmented amongst multiple competing parties, the ability for strong scrutiny and accountability to be exercised is weakened.

By contrast, under FPTP because all parties aim at a clean sweep rather than permanent coalition, any party with a realistic chance of government must broaden its appeal so that it can secure an overall majority. This forces governing parties into the political centre, and the threat of The Day of Judgement is more likely to keep them there. As a result, it is FPTP that generates political moderation. PR empowers sectional minority interest parties more likely to use their bargaining power to drag politics *away* from moderation and towards the interests of their specific support base.

That last point puts us in the ballpark of an oft-heard exchange on these matters. It is typical for opponents of reform to simplistically state that PR would be bad because it would (for example) reward and empower the British National Party, or some other such bogeyman. Their opponents valiantly reply: "but that's just democracy – you should accept what democracy gives you, not try and rig the system in advance!" Now the reformists certainly have a bold and valiant principle on their side. The problem is that in politics principles come at a price.

Forder's take on this issue is astute. For despite appearances, the "it's just democracy!" reply is inaccurate. A more precise reply is: "it's just *one form of* democracy!" After all, FPTP remains a form of electoral democracy – it just happens to be one that discriminates against minority parties (some of whom are extremist). PR is also a form of electoral democracy – it just happens to be one that rewards minority parties (some of whom are extremist). The important question is why we should, on balance, pick one over the other. Advocates of PR seem to assume that in giving more equal representation to sectional interests, PR is somehow vindicated over FPTP and there's nothing more to be said. But on Forder's Schumpeterian analysis, this is a somewhat naive mistake, and at root it rests on a deep misunderstanding about what an electoral system *is*. The core point Forder is driving home (though he does not say it in so many words) is that an electoral system is not some neutral, independent mechanism outside the world of politics that is brought in as a helpful tool for allocating Parliamentary seats and which if rigged up for PR embodies principles like "fairness" better than its rivals. Rather, an electoral system is part and parcel of the political milieu, itself an aspect of the agonistic conflict and competition that necessarily characterises all political engagement.

We in affluent early 21st century Britain can generally afford to be complacent about this. We easily forget that electoral systems are vital components in the careful balancing act of control and stability that all successful political societies need if they are not only to survive, but to avoid the worst excesses of prejudice and persecution they can so readily fall into. We should not, however, be complacent that in the unknown future the things currently promoting stability – economic prosperity, resource abundance, international peace – will continue to hold. If they don't, if Britain one day starts to look more like the Germany that Joseph Schumpeter fled, then the value of an electoral system which rewards single parties offering broad appeals comes much more clearly into focus. It is naive to assume that democracies cannot do bad things, or that everything they do is good. Democracy itself sometimes needs to be carefully controlled (Adolf Hitler, as we all know, was elected). For all its

faults, on balance FPTP offers better built-in correction mechanisms than PR. This is the reality of our world, because it is an imperfect and cold one. As Forder says, this fact simply cannot “be washed away by watery-eyed visions of harmony”.

As with Forder’s book, most of this review has been dedicated to assessing FPTP as compared to PR, rather than the “miserable little compromise” of AV. Insofar as Forder’s arguments are successful, then the bottom really falls out of the case for any switch to AV. If it’s a step on the road to PR, then that becomes a mark against its name. Equally, it is hard to see why anybody would want AV even for its own sake. Producing results even more freakish than FPTP sometimes achieves, usually with even more disproportionate results, AV is surely more offensive to PR advocates than the present system. Yet it is also offensive to Schumpeterians like Forder: because it is a preference voting system, it generates complicated issues of tactical voting and provides incentives for political parties to engage in dishonest positioning and campaigning, thus making The Day of Judgement harder to administer. Insofar as AV is generally even more freakish than FPTP, it may struggle to maintain the relative popular support – and in turn, governmental legitimacy – that FPTP generally manages to hold on to. It is, therefore, the worst of all worlds.

But has Forder really considered and defeated the best cases for PR? Here we must return to the argument noted above, which Forder does not address. Rather than being lumped under the inherently vague and unhelpful heading of “fair votes”, PR advocates look to be on firm ground in demanding *equal* votes. After all, it seems manifest that at present, the only votes that matter in Britain are those cast in marginal constituencies whose outcomes determine Parliamentary swings. The communist in Kensington and the Tory in Tyneside may as well throw their votes in the bin, as long as we stay with FPTP.

But if we switch to PR it seems that this would be much less the case. Although our communist might still find too few fellow believers to elect even the last proportionally-selected candidate, our Tory would certainly not be in that boat – his vote would land with a pile of others, and definitely see (at least one) Tory elected. This raises an important point: that PR appears to better enshrine a principle of *equality* amongst citizen voters, each of whose ballots better approach something like carrying equal weight in the selection of representative and in turn governments. Indeed this is a point anti-Schumpeterians frequently press: that the Schumpeterian conception fails to see the inherent egalitarian potential of voting mechanisms – and crucially the respect for citizens they can better enshrine – and focuses unduly on the mere instrumental mechanism of leadership selection.

This is an important point – but it is not clear it can finally do the work that will need to be demanded of it by PR advocates. Firstly, that an electoral system better enshrines a principle of equality, or citizen respect, is certainly an admirable principle. But as we saw above, principles come at a price. If the upshot of PR is less accountable weaker government less easily removed by voters, it is not at all clear that this is a price worth paying.

Secondly, if we pursue the logic of the “equal votes” reasoning it may take us to some troubling places. For is it *really* the case that with PR each vote matters equally, whereas this is not true of FPTP? The problem with such a line is that it starts to break down quite quickly. Consider again our communist in Kensington. If there are too few fellow communists in Britain, he will still not get an elected representative under PR – is his vote thus still “wasted”, and is he suffering from electoral “inequality”? Given that in politics some people always have to lose, such a conclusion looks extravagant, to say the least.

And things get worse. Imagine now our Tory in Tyneside. Under PR as opposed to FPTP, it seems he can say that his vote is not “wasted” because it ends up on a pile which is translated into (at least one) Tory MP. But here a nasty problem arises. What if our Tory asks himself a simple question: “if I stay at home and simply don’t vote, will it make any difference at all?” Unfortunately, under *both* PR and FPTP, the answer appears to be “no”. Because the point about elections is that they are *never* decided by just one vote (for indeed when the margins are that small in the real world, recounts, re-runs and legal disputes are what settle the outcomes, not crucial final ballots). In mass-democratic elections, no one vote ever makes the crucial difference. Under PR, it may *feel* to the Tory in Tyneside that his vote “matters” and therefore is treated “equally” with others. But this is hard to sustain, when we note that under either FPTP or PR if our Tory stays at home and everyone else votes as before, the outcome will be exactly the same in either case.

This raises many tricky problems about the paradoxical nature of voting. After all, how can it be that each individual vote makes no difference, but all of them summed collectively make *all* the difference? These are the sorts of issues – and they are complicated indeed – that Richard Tuck addresses in his important book *Free Riding*. Tuck thinks he can establish the rational justification of each individual voting, based on a particular philosophical theory of causation. Personally, I am sceptical about the ability of a refined esoteric philosophical argument to overturn the common sense observation that if I don’t vote this makes no difference to the outcome, *therefore* my vote considered individually simply does not matter. But the point here is to stress that Forder is neatly and deliberately side-stepping those sorts of questions altogether. His emphasis is not on the question of *individual* votes, but on the merits of overall *systems of voting*. He wants us to look at the big picture, and decide which *system* is better for Britain. If we accept his view that what really matters is selecting and rejecting leaders who control parties, the case for FPTP is strong indeed.

But strong as it is, it also opens some troubling questions. In his [review of *Free Riding*](#) David Runciman made an astute observation about declining voter turnout in western democracies: that it “has coincided with an increasing scepticism on the part of the public about what their governments are for, and what they are capable of achieving, in the face of international markets.” This point, today more than ever, matters.

Forder’s argument ultimately rests upon the claim that electing and controlling political leaders is essential because these are the people that ultimately call the shots, and can call the shots in different ways. But to what extent is this true now and likely to be so in the future? For many, one of the most striking features of the AV debate will be its apparent *irrelevance*. After all we are living in a period of profound social and economic reconfiguration. Following the great crash of 2008, governments around the world – ours most especially – are scrambling to implement fiscal retrenchment and austerity packages demanded by an economic situation beyond the control of any one sovereign government. So because the banks crashed in 2008, we are told that British higher education must be made more exclusive and socially divisive, the healthcare service be destroyed, welfare support for the disabled and elderly withdrawn, public sector employees thrown into unemployment, schools left unbuilt and socio-economic inequality allowed to spiral ever more out of control.

Against this, multinational corporations are permitted to avoid billions in tax, whilst the banks that caused the giant mess are not only rescued with public money, but allowed to continue paying out eye-watering bonuses whilst the “rules” which allowed the entire catastrophe to occur in the first place remain conspicuously

unchanged. International credit rating agencies sombrely intoning that Britain's AAA status is at risk carry far more political and economic weight than any member of the opposition ever will. Forder emphasises appealing to the political centre in order to gain a majority as a factor in Britain's post-1970s electoral history. This is certainly important. But this period coincides with the rise and rise of unrestrained global financial capitalism, and the demands which unelected, unaccountable corporate institutions can now press upon sovereign governments. If Tony Blair and Gordon Brown feared anything more than Rupert Murdoch's News International, it was the City of London – to whom they kowtowed obsequiously with such spectacular results.

Joseph Schumpeter's best known idea – the one for which he is still rightly famous – remains his principle of “creative destruction”; that what drives capitalism is not static competition between firms, but dynamic long-run *innovation* which destroys the old ways of production and puts new, better ones in their place. Schumpeter saw this as the great driving success of capitalism, but feared it would be replaced by forms of state socialism promising (if not necessarily delivering) greater socio-economic equality to the downtrodden and excluded. Clearly Schumpeter's anxieties were not fulfilled: socialism as a realistic economic and political arrangement is firmly confined to the dustbin of history. But what ought to worry us all is the way in which capitalist “innovation” went so spectacularly wrong in 2008.

The “innovators” in the financial industry did not come up with new and better ways of doing financial capitalism. They came up with short-term arrangements to maximise profit which in the longer-term nearly dragged the entire global economy off the edge of a cliff. But worse, rather than this resulting in a process of what we might call “destructive-destruction” – i.e. the failed innovators exiting the stage as better alternatives present themselves – the failed innovators have been rescued and preserved. The web of banks, ratings agencies and insurance companies that in complicity crashed the global economy almost all live on – some of them directly owned and supported by taxpayers. What is more, these institutions now know for sure what they had previously only suspected: that they are too big to fail, and that when push comes to shove governments will rescue them.

The situation is perverse. Multinational capitalist behemoths with turnover well in excess of most nation-state GDPs are supported and guaranteed by the tax dollars of citizens earning minimum wage. These behemoths cannot fail. Indeed, they can dictate terms to the sovereign governments whose tax dollars guarantee them. This new international capitalism is a strange beast, and not one that Schumpeter – or perhaps anyone else – previously imagined. In this brave new world, the importance of *elected leaders* suddenly seems to diminish. Of course, the destruction of the British welfare state currently being witnessed is very much a political preference of the Conservative Party in particular, and one being enabled rather than dictated by the circumstances of the global economic situation. Yet given the pattern of the last Labour government, one has to wonder if the difference would ultimately only ever have been one of degree.

Forder wants us to acknowledge that political leaders matter and therefore so does picking and controlling them. Insofar as he is right, his case for retaining FPTP is strong; to quote Schumpeter a final time: “If acceptance of leadership is the true function of the electorate's vote, the case for proportional representation collapses because its premises are no longer binding”. But if we become sceptical about the future power and importance of political leaders in our increasingly globalised brave new world, it is not clear that Forder (or anybody else) can offer a compelling answer to the question of why, next May, one ought to bother voting in the AV referendum at

all. This is not just because of the niggling fact that your vote taken individually will make no difference to the outcome (that is true for all of us considered individually, at every election). It is because even on a Schumpeterian outlook of deflated democracy, there is a feeling that The Day of Judgement is fast becoming a mere ceremony. That increasingly power does not lie (as Forder so correctly insists that it should) with the voters, but with the wielders of economic forces who have only passing contempt for the wishes of electorates in (what were?) sovereign nation states.