

# Proportional Representation: The wrong answer to the right frustrations

*And why it risks deepening the crisis its champions claim it will solve*

Adam Tugwell | 3 June 2026



Proportional representation has returned to British politics with the confidence of a solution whose moment has finally arrived. It is presented as the modern, fair, mathematically elegant alternative to **first-past-the-post** - a system that appears increasingly out of step with public expectations and electoral outcomes.

In an age of shrinking majorities, falling turnout, and widespread disillusionment, PR offers a seductive promise: a democracy where every vote counts and every voice is heard.

But the appeal of PR rests on a dangerous assumption:

**That the rest of the political system is healthy enough for PR to work.**

It isn't.

And that is why PR risks making everything worse.

Because proportional representation only works in a political culture that doesn't need it.

And the UK is nowhere near that place.

## The Seductive Simplicity of PR

PR's promise is mathematical fairness: seats that match votes, representation that mirrors the national mood, and a system where no vote is wasted.

Many inside Westminster sincerely believe this would restore legitimacy. They look at the distortions of the current system and conclude that the counting method is the problem.

But fairness in democracy is not a spreadsheet problem.

It is a relationship between voters and power.

And that relationship is already broken.

## The Misunderstanding Built into Modern British Politics

Most voters believe they are choosing a party, a leader, or a national agenda. In reality, they are electing a **local representative** whose influence is tightly constrained by party machinery.

Over decades, the public has been conditioned to see the party as the unit of democracy - not the person, not the community, not the relationship between the two.

This conditioning didn't happen by accident.

*Parties select candidates.*

*Parties control messaging.*

*Parties whip votes.*

*Parties decide careers.*

The logical conclusion is that the party is what matters.

PR doesn't correct this misunderstanding.

**It formalises it.**

## How PR Deepens Party Control

Under most forms of **proportional representation**, voters do not choose individuals. They choose party lists. The party decides who appears on the list, in what order, and who ultimately enters Parliament.

The voter's role becomes even more distant.

**The party's control becomes absolute.**

What is currently an informal dominance becomes a **structural monopoly**.

PR does not empower voters.

**It empowers parties.**

It does not increase accountability.

**It removes it.**

It does not bring politics closer to the public.

**It pushes it further away.**

## The Technocratic Trap

PR appeals to those who want a *technical* fix to a *cultural* and *moral* problem. It is the kind of solution that emerges when faith in political behaviour has collapsed and the only remaining hope is to adjust the mechanism.

But the problem is not arithmetic.

The problem is behaviour, values, and the absence of genuine leadership - themes explored in [\*The Way of Awakened Politics for Good Government\*](#).

Changing the voting system cannot compensate for a political culture that no longer knows how to lead.

## Coalitions Without Consent

PR almost always produces coalition governments.

But voters rarely know *before* the election what coalition they are actually voting for.

This creates a democratic deficit:

- Voters choose a party
- Parties choose their partners *after* the election

- The resulting government may have no mandate for its combined programme

This is a **transparency problem** that PR makes worse, not better.

## Accountability Diffusion

Under PR, responsibility becomes blurred:

- Who is responsible when things go wrong?
- Who deserves credit when things go right?
- Who can be removed if change is needed?

PR doesn't just spread power - it spreads blame until it disappears.

This is a **governance accountability** issue that PR systems struggle with.

## Party Cartelisation

Political scientists call it *cartelisation*:

Parties behave like a closed shop, protecting each other from outside competition.

PR accelerates this because:

- parties become the only route into Parliament
- party lists become the gatekeeping mechanism
- new voices must negotiate with existing parties to gain influence

PR is not pluralistic.

It is cartel-friendly.

## The Collapse of Local Representation

One of the most damaging consequences of PR - *and one of the least discussed* - is the erosion of local representation.

PR breaks the link between a community and its representative. It replaces geography with ideology.

Local representation becomes symbolic rather than real.

**Communities lose their voice.**

**Parties gain more control.**

This is the opposite of what a healthy democracy requires - a theme explored in [The Local Economy Governance System](#).

## The Centralisation Paradox

PR is often sold as a way to make politics more pluralistic.

But in practice it centralises power inside party headquarters.

Why?

Because:

- candidate selection becomes national
- party lists are controlled centrally
- coalition negotiations happen at the top
- local voices are sidelined

PR strengthens the very centralisation people want to escape.

## The Public Expectation Mismatch

People expect PR to:

- reduce corruption
- increase honesty
- improve behaviour
- make politics more collaborative

But none of these outcomes are guaranteed by PR.

They are cultural, not mechanical.

PR cannot deliver the behaviour people want from politics because behaviour is not created by voting systems - **it is created by values.**

## The Legitimacy Illusion

PR creates the *appearance* of fairness while masking deeper unfairness:

- party elites choose candidates
- coalition deals override manifestos
- voters lose the ability to remove individuals
- accountability becomes abstract

PR does not fix legitimacy.

It manufactures the illusion of it.

## Why Politicians Want PR Now

There is another dimension to this debate - one rarely acknowledged publicly.

The current political class - *increasingly managerial, increasingly reactive* - is not leading. It is not solving problems. It is not governing with courage or vision.

As explored in [\*A Leadership Void in a Moment That Calls for Far More Than Westminster Politics\*](#), the political class is:

- reactive, not proactive
- managerial, not visionary
- dependent on the system, not independent of it

And because it cannot lead, it is desperate for ways to **shore up majorities that are wasting away** through public disenfranchisement.

PR offers:

- a way to preserve relevance
- a way to maintain influence
- a way to survive declining public trust
- a way to lock in position even as legitimacy collapses

This is not about fairness.

It is about self-preservation.

## The Money-Centric System Behind It All

The political system is in sync with a wider problem - the money-centric, extractive economic model that is running out of road. As explored in [\*Why MPs Can Afford to Give Away Their Salaries and Voters Can't\*](#), the political class is insulated from the consequences of the system it defends. Voters are not.

PR becomes a tool to:

- stabilise a political class that cannot stabilise the country
- protect incumbents from the consequences of their own failures
- maintain a system that benefits them but harms the public

PR is not a democratic reform.

It is a survival strategy.

## The Irony at the Heart of the Debate

The uncomfortable truth is this:

**If the UK had the political culture required for PR to work, PR wouldn't feel necessary.**

A healthy system would already have:

- empowered local democracy
- independent representatives
- decentralised power
- transparent institutions
- civic responsibility
- accountability mechanisms

In that environment, PR would be a technical detail - not a salvation narrative.

The fact that PR feels like the answer is itself a symptom of how far the system has drifted from genuine representation.

## Further Reading: The Deeper Democratic Crisis

These works explore the structural, cultural, and civic issues that PR cannot fix - and that must be addressed before any voting system can deliver genuine representation:

- **The Way of Awakened Politics for Good Government**  
<https://adamtugwell.blog/2025/01/17/the-way-of-awakened-politics-for-good-government-full-text/>
- **Officially: None of the Above**  
<https://adamtugwell.blog/2025/03/26/officially-none-of-the-above-full-text/>
- **The Local Economy & Governance System**  
<https://adamtugwell.blog/2025/11/21/the-local-economy-governance-system-online-text/>
- **A Leadership Void in a Moment That Calls for Far More Than Westminster Politics**  
<https://adamtugwell.blog/2026/05/10/a-leadership-void-in-a-moment-that-calls-for-far-more-than-westminster-politics/>
- **Why MPs Can Afford to Give Away Their Salaries and Voters Can't**  
<https://adamtugwell.blog/2026/05/19/why-mps-can-afford-to-give-away-their-salaries-and-voters-cant/>

## Conclusion: PR Is Not the Answer - It Is the Distraction

The public is right to be frustrated.

*The system is failing.*

*Representation is broken.*

*Accountability is weak.*

*Parties have too much power.*

*Communities have too little.*

*The political class is out of its depth.*

*The economic system is running out of road.*

But PR is not the solution.

It is the **false fix** that diverts attention away from the real democratic crisis.

Until the deeper issues are confronted - party dominance, centralised power, establishment alignment, leadership failure, and the erosion of genuine local representation - no voting system will deliver the democracy people believe they are voting for.

**PR does not change the game.**

**It just changes the scoreboard.**

## Further Information

To explore more of Adam Tugwell's writing, including the online edition of this post, please visit:

[www.adamtugwell.blog](http://www.adamtugwell.blog)

## Copyright Notice

**Copyright ©2026 Adam Tugwell**

All rights reserved.

This publication reflects the personal experience, views, and opinions of the Author.

No part of this work may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted, adapted, translated, or otherwise used in any form or by any means - electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise - without prior written permission from the Author.

The Author asserts the moral right to be identified as the creator of this work and to object to any distortion or misrepresentation of it.

This work may be downloaded and stored for personal, non-commercial use only.

Any unauthorised reproduction, plagiarism, or misattribution constitutes a violation of copyright.

The Author accepts no responsibility for, and makes no endorsement of, content accessed through external links, PDFs, digital platforms, organisations, or individuals referenced herein.

Readers remain solely responsible for evaluating the accuracy and suitability of all external material.

This copyright notice shall be governed by and construed in accordance with the laws of England and Wales.