

Emerging inadequacies of the First-past-the-post electoral system

Why UK inequality is spiraling out of control

Stuart Donald 2023



- **The UK is the most unequal country in North West Europe** - the UK has materially higher levels of inequality than any of its most relevant European peers
- **Countries like the UK that have First-past-the-post (FPTP) are all more unequal than those using PR** - across almost all metrics, states with FPTP underperform in terms of social outcomes; this underperformance has increased since 1980
- **FPTP countries have higher inequality because the FPTP mechanism itself weakens the progressive lobby** – since 1980, it has become clear that FPTP makes it easier for right wing parties to get elected, stay in power and drive ever more right wing agendas; this compromises the voice of the left and leads to under-investment in public goods and services for wider society over the longer term which in turn creates greater inequality
- **Brexit only happened because the effects of UK inequality are now damaging middle England** - Voting to leave the EU was strongly correlated to both poor and middle class English voters where the effects of inequality have had the biggest impact in recent decades
- **Unless the electoral system is changed, the UK is trapped in a cycle of perpetually increasing inequality** – as long as both the Tory and Labour parliamentary parties remain committed to their support for FPTP, there is no near term prospect of moving to PR. As a result, inequality and its effects can only increase.



Who are our 'relevant peers'?

3 Groups

The 'Nordic Nobles'

The 5 Western European Scandinavian countries



Norway
Denmark
Sweden
Finland
Iceland

The 'Mainland Moderates'

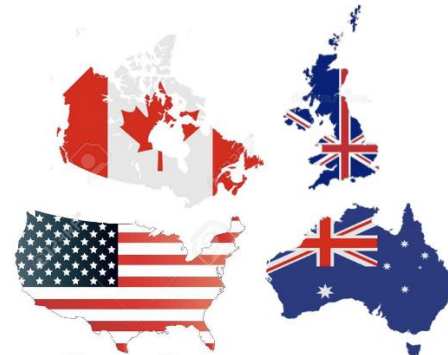
The 6 North-Western European mainland states + Ireland



Ireland
Netherlands
Austria
Germany
France
Belgium
Switzerland

The 'Free-market Fanatics'

The 4 major 'neoliberal' Western economies of the anglosphere



UK
USA
Australia
Canada

Lots in common

- All EU or EEA states
 - Closest geographic neighbours
 - Similar mix of culture, climate and resources to Scotland / UK
 - Typically centrist coalition-based politics
 - All use Proportional Representation
-
- Leading players in the EU / EEA / EFTA projects
 - Most have shared the ½ century EU journey with Scotland / UK (until Brexit)
 - Similar mix of culture, climate and resources
 - Typically centrist coalition-based politics
 - Most use Proportional Representation
-
- Closest allies linguistically and shared imperial histories
 - Politics dominated by free-market oriented / conservative governments (i.e. neoliberal)
 - All First Past the Post or similar voting systems

The analysis is broken down into the 6 following parts:

| | |
|--|---------------|
| Part I – the staggering truth about inequality in the UK | p. 12 |
| Part II – the hidden evils of First Past the Post | p. 58 |
| Part III – FPTP and the emasculation of the UK Labour party | p.135 |
| Part IV – how misery drove the English to Brexit | p. 166 |
| Part V - from FPTP to PR: asking turkeys to vote for Xmas | p. 215 |
| Part VI – A way out for Scotland? | p. 234 |

The key points and conclusions of each of these is summarised on the following 6 slides



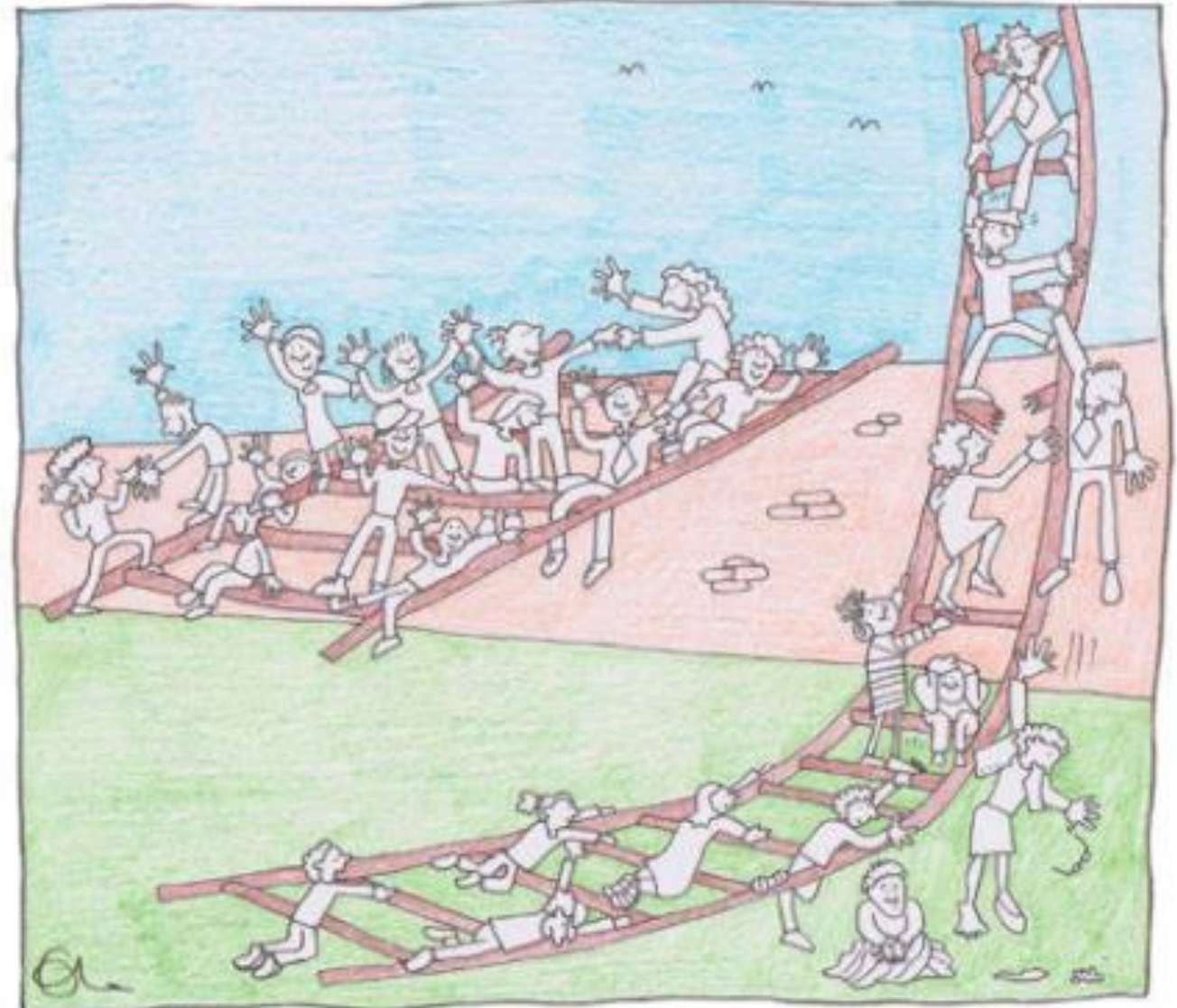
Scope: *compares the UK v peers across a wide range of social metrics and outcomes*

Summary:

- Since 1980, the UK govt has spent far less than its European peers on welfare, health, education, childcare support and other public goods and services
- Since 1980, like its anglosphere peers, UK govt has applied a more strident form of neoliberalism than its European peers
- Today, the UK has the poorest life expectancy, child mortality and adult learning statistics against European peers

Conclusion:

- Today UK is the most unequal country in North West Europe



Two ladders

Image: Ella Furness

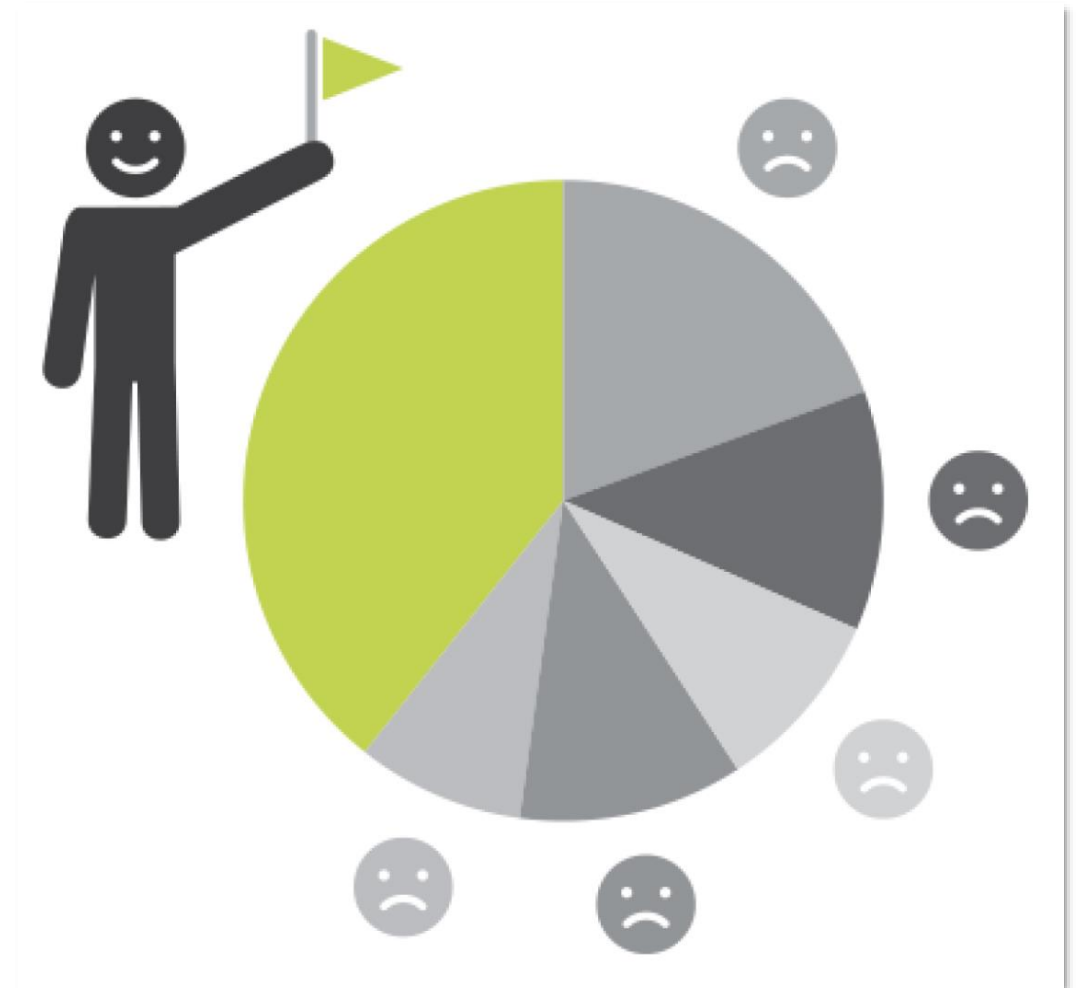
Scope: compares the key features and relative performance of different electoral systems across peers

Summary:

- Like the US, Canada and Australia, the UK uses a First Past the Post system whereas the Europeans use a PR system
- since 1980, the FPTP countries each have '2 party' systems whereas the PR governments have involved at least 4 parties in different combinations over the 40 years
- In-built biases ensure right wing parties get more time in power under FPTP than PR
- FPTP countries have increasingly lagged their PR peers across all inequality measures since 1980

Conclusion:

- Pluralist and centrist PR democracy achieves lower inequality than the narrower and more right wing democracies of FPTP



Scope: looks at whether UK labour has been able to close the inequality gap v European peers when in power over past 40 years

Summary:

- Since 1980, the Labour party has been forced by the UK's FPTP regime away from its progressive instincts, in order to have any chance of getting to power
- between 1997 and 2010, a more centrist, 'New Labour' enjoyed 12 consecutive years in power but failed to close any of the major inequality gaps v European peer averages
- despite this, the UK establishment insists on presenting UK Labour as a viable, left-leaning alternative for UK voters

Conclusion:

- Under FPTP, progressive lobbies can only get to power through compromising their progressive ambition, resulting in poorer levels of social justice



Image: Poster Man

Scope: *investigates the link between inequality and the propensity to vote Leave across middle England*

Summary:

- Brexit was decided in England by older and middle class voters across both North and South
- Leave's vote was strongest in the wealthier, Southern Tory areas, where rising inequality has had the biggest relative impact on deteriorating quality of life
- the greater the rise in inequality across Tory seats, the more concentrated vote Leave turned out to be

Conclusion:

- Brexit happened to the UK because of long term, increasing inequality affecting not just poorer but also more affluent parts of England



Image: Bruce Mackinnon

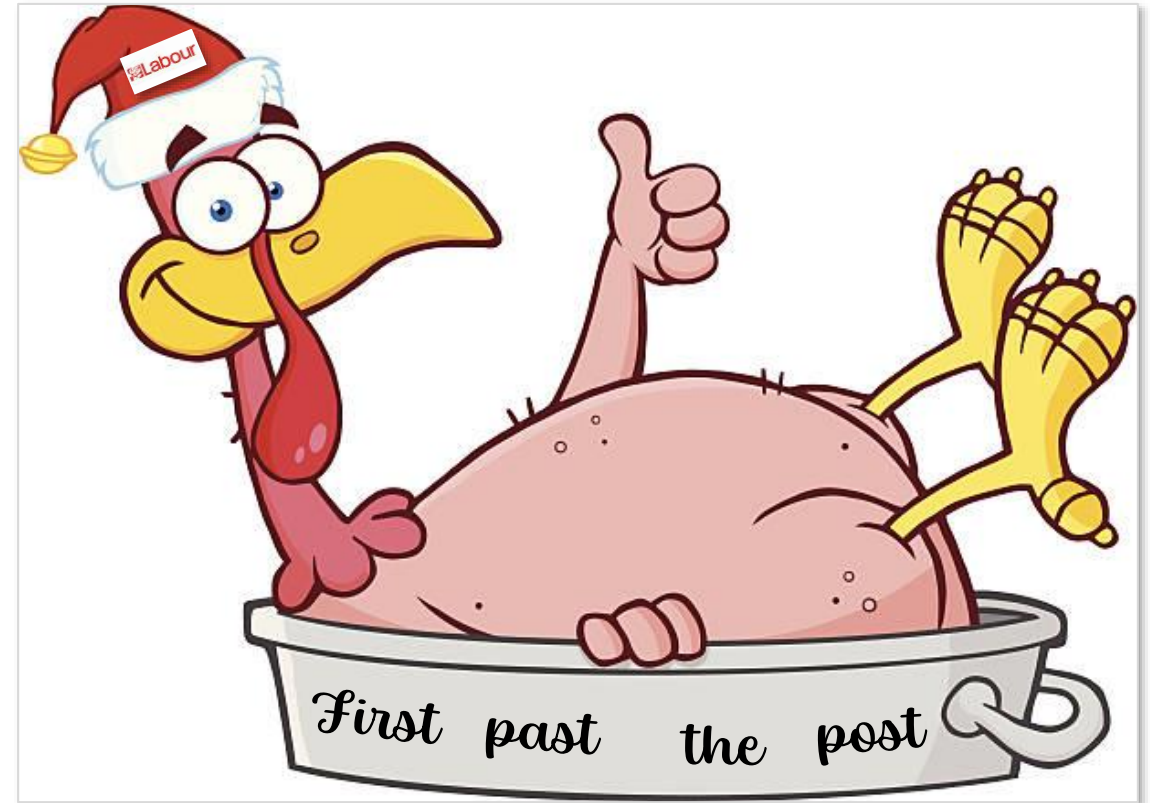
Scope: explores the huge barriers to the UK achieving PR looking at failed and successful precedents and what it will take to get there

Summary:

- Despite the emerging awareness links FPTP and inequality, the parliamentary labour party does not appear ready to give up its ambition or its stake in the FPTP game to move to PR
- Until this happens, all attempts to introduce PR will be blocked or watered down to meaningless types of electoral reform (as per the 2011 AV ref)
- If PR emerges on the political agenda, the UK establishment will fight with more vigour than ever to preserve FPTP and its role in the status quo

Conclusion:

- Until the parliamentary labour party supports PR, it is virtually impossible to bring about PR in the UK



Scope: compares whether a Labour-led UK or an Indy Scotland would be more likely to provide a PR future

Summary

- Labour's fear of losing soft votes to the Tories means it simply cannot offer or do the very basic progressive things fundamental to improving fairness in the UK:
 - ditch FPTP and replace with PR
 - increase spending to European average to tackle inequality; and
 - take the UK back into the EU
- meanwhile Scotland has a functioning PR system, now ¼ century old, which would allow a bolder ambition to tackle inequality and is committed to an EU future

Conclusion

- With the UK unable to escape FPTP and its increasingly unequal outcomes, unlocking Scotland's PR maturity through Independence might become the deciding factor in settling its constitutional debate



Image: Miguel Villalba Sánchez

Timeframe and Data sets

Why is the research timeframe set at 40 years?

40 years takes us back to 1979, when Margaret Thatcher was elected, heralding a new era in which free-market ideas started to become hugely influential in the UK as well as globally

What is special about the datasets?

in recent years, far richer and more reliable data sources have emerged allowing us to benchmark the UK v relevant peers to serve as proper perspective on the performance of the UK over a 40 year period

Why now?

because using a 40 year period is long enough to allow us to more confidently identify long term trends and their implications



Sources and Scopes

main sources



scopes

- data provided to the OECD and other bodies by govts on spending, health outcomes, other social / economic metrics
- data collected from govts and surveys allowing comparison of electoral systems, elections and parties over time
- data on deprivation levels across the UK covering income, employment, education, housing and the environment + polling data



Part I

OECD datasets
Eurostat
WID
Resolution Foundation
Statsica.com
Institute for Fiscal Studies
Danny Dorling (various publications)

Part II

ParlGov Project
European Social Survey 4 (2008) & 8 (2016)
British Social Attitudes survey no. 32
OECD datasets
House of Commons Library
Soskice and Iversen 2005
Döring and Manow 2015

Part III

ParlGov Project
Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2022
OECD datasets

Part IV

Ashcroft EU ref exit poll 2016
YouGov EU ref exit poll 2016
F. Liberini, AJ. Oswald, E. Proto & M. Redoano Sept 2017
2011 census
ONS Deprivation index 2004 & 2019 (LSOA xls, tech & resch reps)
House of Commons Library
Danny Dorling (various publications)

Part V

Statistica.com

