

Man behind Scottish Voice wants to make MSPs listen

My son will soon be sitting his Standard Grade exam in Modern Studies and I've been helping him revise, which is why I now know a little about the Scottish voting system, and especially the pros and cons of proportional representation.

Devolution always allowed for an element of PR, due to the "list" system in which 56 MSPs are elected according to the share of the vote their party has received overall. Early on, this led some of us to harbour hopes that Holyrood would be filled with brilliant free-thinkers and smaller parties, presided over by some Caledonian equivalent of Vaclav Havel.

Largely, this has not happened. Only six parties filled the seats of the debating chamber after the 2003 election (plus four independent MSPs). But, were it not for PR, that number would have been four — the seven Green seats and six Scottish Socialists all came from those parties' share of the list vote. Looking at the ballot

paper delivered to my door, I have to decide between 23 names on the regional list.

If I lived outside Edinburgh, I might be offered the Nine Percent Growth Party, the Jacobite Party, or the Equal Parenting Alliance. As it is, I can vote for the Witchery Tour Party (led by a ghost), the Publican Party (for smoking-rooms in bars), or even the Had Enough Party. Too much choice, or a

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testament to a healthy political debate?

Archie Stirling, who has set up Scottish Voice, isn't sure, but when we met at an Edinburgh hotel I asked him why he thought there was room for a new party. His answer was simple: he had looked at the state of Scotland and found it wanting. He was fed up with the stranglehold the big parties

exert, and angered by missed chances and mismanagement.

What bothered him most was that the politicians don't listen to the electorate. He cited two examples: the electricity pylons planned alongside the A9, and a wind farm clearly visible from the A9 near Dunblane. Both were an annoyance to him, but no one had acted to assuage his grievances. I asked if by any chance he lived near the A9. He admitted he did. So could his party actually be the A9 Party? He gave a chuckle by way of reply. Affable and thoughtful, Stirling has steeliness in the genes (his uncle founded the SAS), and is handsome enough to have bagged Diana Rigg as a one-time wife.

What is clear from talking to him and from his booklet, *Finding Our Voice*, is that Stirling not only holds strong opinions but has a way with words. He believes there are too many party apparatchiks in Holyrood, and that the country is over-reliant on the public sec-

tor for its jobs and GDP. He wants a change of mindset, to be achieved only by "a confrontation with political orthodoxy", and admits it will be a difficult and protracted process.

The problem with small parties is that often they are riven by factions and can fracture. Stirling, conversely, has found common ground with NHS First. Such coalitions can give hope that the voices of the smaller parties will be heard. Doubtless, Stirling's antipathy to pylons would appeal to the Greens, say, but he might be in trouble with those wind farms.

Before leaving Stirling, however, I added a caveat. A friend, a late-night phone-in DJ in New Zealand, was persuaded by her listeners to run for Parliament. Duly elected, she soon found herself disenchanted. "They all want me to do things for them!" she complained.

Archie Stirling smiled at the story, then paused and jotted down her name, the better to remember it.