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THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM IN BRITAIN, 1918-1951, by D. E. Butler.
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The British parliamentary system has long been regarded with envy by countries not blessed with a similar degree of governmental stability, and held up as an example for those nations which have patterned their governmental system after the British model. Many reasons have been advanced for the failure of other parliamentary governments to approximate the success of British parliamentarism. Among these the electoral system is probably the most important single factor, although it alone cannot tell the whole story. Social and political traditions, rather than electoral arrangements, have frequently prevented an adaptation to the British model. At the same time, it is well to remember that until fairly recently the electoral system was in the center of political debate in England. Throughout the nineteenth century, when England completed its transition from an aristocracy to political democracy, the electoral system was a political issue of first magnitude. The system was eventually stabilized with the adoption of the Representation of the People Act of 1918, and no further developments of any significance have occurred since. As a result, there has been a dearth of literature on the subject after that date. The author of the present volume, a research fellow at Nuffield College, Oxford, has filled the gap by writing its history during the period from 1918 to 1951. With admirable persistence he has prepared a painstaking study of the attacks made upon it during that period in the first part of his study, while devoting the second part to its actual working. Of the two parts, the first is probably the more interesting and illuminating one.

In the attempted or actual legislative changes during the period under consideration the most fundamental, and persistently recurring, issues were those involving plural voting and the conflict between the single-member constituency system and proportional representation. Attacks upon the former were directed against the business and university vote, both carryovers of the older aristocratic systems, which did not, however, materially affect party representation. The controversy revolving about the latter comprises an argument of more substance. While proportional representation was particularly close to the hearts of the small parties, which were being reduced to the point of evanescence by the workings of the single-member system, it had

adherents among members of all political parties. The adoption of proportional representation, as the author demonstrates, would perhaps not have caused any substantial changes in party representation most of the time; yet, it would most certainly have prevented a clear-cut parliamentary majority. Impressive arguments can be advanced for both systems. As formulated by J. S. Mill and Walter Bagehot respectively, the virtue of proportional representation lies in a tendency to promote justice of representation while the advantage of the single-member system is its support of governmental stability. At one time after 1918, proportional representation was only narrowly defeated in spite of the disinclination of most persons concerned to sacrifice stability to lofty and vague notions of justice. It was England's good fortune that the practical sense of its statesmen and politicians resisted the speciousness of the argument for proportional representation. Their long experience with parliamentary institutions enabled them to anticipate problems which were not clearly foreseen in other countries. The success of their decision in favor of the single-member system was undoubtedly assured by the long English two-party tradition which was perhaps more instrumental in producing parliamentary majorities than the electoral system.

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