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Whatever happened to the Westminster Model? The 'Italianisation' of British politics

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*The UK was once viewed by political scientists as embodying a distinct majoritarian form of politics – the 'Westminster Model' – that stood in contrast to the 'consensus' democracies found elsewhere in Europe. Several of the countries in the latter group, such as Italy, were often assumed to be inherently prone to instability in comparison to the UK. Yet as **Martin J. Bull** explains, politics in Westminster now has some striking similarities with the Italian approach that once invited scorn from British observers.*



In an interview with the Radio 4 Today programme on 26 September, veteran Conservative politician, Nicholas Soames (who recently had had the whip withdrawn for voting against the legislation of the government of Boris Johnson) decried both the failure to vote through a Brexit deal and the recent inflammatory debates in the House of Commons for undermining the longstanding international reputation of the UK political system and the high regard in which it has been held.

He is not wrong. If you had asked an educated British person or a university politics student in the 1970s what they thought of Italian politics, their response would probably have started with a snigger and finished with a laugh, interspersed with words such as "unstable", "chaotic", "extreme" and the like. For looking down their noses at 'Continental' politics was a common approach for many British people brought up on the fare of the putative superiority of the so-called 'Westminster Model'.

Indeed, the study of politics itself was heavily influenced by the predominance of the Westminster Model, made famous by Arend Lijphart's classification of liberal democratic political systems into 'majoritarian' (aka the Westminster Model) and 'consensus' democracies. And despite Lijphart's argument that consensus democracies were *not* lower in democratic quality than majoritarian systems, it was difficult to shake off the influence of the British political system which was frequently used as a lens through which to analyse – and judge – other systems.



Credit: [Steven Johnson \(CC BY-NC-SA 2.0\)](#)

This difference was also often implicitly framed within 'modernisation theory' by which under-developed nation-states go through successive phases of growth as they undergo a transition into advanced capitalist societies – from the 'periphery' to the 'centre' (or the 'core'). Thus, southern European political systems could expect to see their political systems undergo modernisation over time in the direction of the Westminster Model. Indeed, the phenomenon of 'political lag' was coined in the Italian case because its economy underwent extraordinary growth in the 1950s and 1960s (the so-called 'economic miracle') despite the embarrassing state of its political system which had apparently failed to keep up.

So, the British political system was strong and stable because it was based on a first-past-the-post electoral system that produced a parliamentary majority for a single party in a legislature where a monopoly of power rested in one House (the lower house as the only elected chamber) and was reinforced by two main parties (of a moderate political nature), strong party discipline, cabinet collective responsibility and a Prime Minister who was 'first among equals'.

In contrast, the Italian political system was fragmented and unstable because it was based on a PR electoral system that struggled to produce a majority for a single party (meaning coalition government) in a legislature where both Houses had equal powers, reinforced by a welter of political parties including significant extremist parties, an absence of party discipline, an absence of collective cabinet responsibility, and a Prime Minister whose power was no greater than his coalition partners would allow.

The culture of superiority, moreover, was not just rooted in the British outlook. On the contrary, the Westminster Model was widely admired abroad and became a beacon for the maturing of political systems in the 'periphery'. Italy, for example, was presented with its first significant opportunity to 'modernise' its political system as a result of the end of

the Cold War in 1989. The collapse of the former communist regimes saw an implosion of the Italian party system and the disintegration and dissolution of virtually all the existing parties between 1989 and 1994.

There was a widespread consensus amongst the new parties and politicians that emerged in that period that the Italian political system needed to undergo a transition towards a 'majoritarian' system along the lines of the Westminster Model. This, it was claimed, would be achieved through electoral and constitutional reform to enhance the majoritarian capacities of the political system and a new set of parties that could respond to the demands of bipolarising the party system into two moderate alternating coalitions of left and right.

Yet, 25 years on, after several (partisan-motivated) changes to the electoral system, three significant but failed attempts to achieve constitutional reform and a limited, imperfect bipolarisation of the party system, the quest for the Westminster Model appears to have ended, with a reversion of trends towards a more proportional system. And while this failure has deep roots in the failure of the political parties to see anything beyond their own partisan interests (meaning agreement has been hard to reach), it is also true that the beacon of the Westminster Model has not so much gone out as revealed itself to be a lighthouse sitting on perilous rocks.

For the British electoral system no longer produces majorities but hung parliaments, the House of Commons has been continually frustrated by the House of Lords, the two main parties have become more extreme and have been confronted with new challenger parties, party discipline has broken down and cabinet collective responsibility undermined, leaving the Prime Minister as helpless as his Italian counterpart.

Finally, the popular image of violent and explosive confrontation and argument in the Italian parliament has now reached the Mother of Parliaments, the House of Commons. Of note is that the two main parties that currently make up the Italian government (the Five Star Movement and the Democratic Party) are both in support of reforming the current (mixed part proportional/party majoritarian) electoral system in a proportional direction, while the chief proponent of a majoritarian electoral system is now the far right, increasingly extremist League of Matteo Salvini.

In short, it is not just the decline in attraction of the Westminster Model that is significant or that modernisation theory has not worked, but rather that the theory appears to be working in *reverse* in this case, for we appear to be witnessing a 'peripheralisation' of the old 'centre', if not an 'Italianisation' of British politics. So, who is looking down their noses now?

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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