

Loose descriptions

Get used to picking up all those synonyms that are designed to give writers the freedom to think loosely about the evidence they have, phrases like ‘greater or lesser extent’ – ask the writer what he means; effectively this says nothing, because it leaves all the doors open – and descriptions of a claim as a ‘reasoned rule of thumb’, which is usually a good indication that the writer has no evidence to back it up.

Example: Electoral reform

In an article in the *Observer* in 2012, Andrew Rawnsley criticised the arguments of those who are opposed to reform of the British electoral system, arguing:

‘Supporters of the status quo will insist that the current voting system has the great merit of producing reliable parliamentary majorities for single party governments. (That it does – except on those quite frequent occasions when it doesn’t, as it didn’t at the last election.)’

The obvious question to ask here is: what does he mean by ‘quite frequent occasions’? In the 65 years since the end of the Second World War there have been only two occasions when a government failed to gain a majority and had to govern as a minority or coalition government: Feb 1974 – a minority government – and 2010 – a coalition. So only once in every 30 to 35 years have governments not gained a majority, which hardly supports the contention that it happens on ‘quite frequent occasions’.

Still, perhaps the weight of the argument rests on the equally vague notion of a ‘reliable majority’. So now we need to analyse what he might mean by this. The clearest indication of whether or not a majority is ‘reliable’ would be if it maintains a government in power, so that it serves out its full term of office.

On these grounds, the only unreliable majority was the majority of 4 won by the Labour government in 1964, which then went back to the electorate in 1966 to gain a ‘reliable’ majority. In October 1974 the minority government that was elected in February of that year held another general election and gained a majority of 3. However, although this majority was small, the government lasted until 1979, its full term. Here perhaps the writer wanted to make use of his other caveat, ‘for single party governments’, because the Labour government had to rely on an agreement, though not a coalition, with the Liberal Party to get its legislation passed.

So, as you can see, this is hardly a persuasive argument. On only two occasions (1974 and 2010) has the electoral system produced minority governments in 18 elections over 65 years. This hardly seems to be ‘frequent’. As for unreliable majorities, even including 1974 on the grounds that, although it was a ‘single party government’, it relied on the support of a third party, it has only produced two of these (1964 and 1974).