John Bull. Welcome to Britannia, Socrates. I am surprised that you, a citizen of the Birthplace of Democracy, have not visited the Mother of Parliaments before in your search for wisdom.

Socrates. I am greatly honoured to be welcomed in this mighty nation, Mr. Bull, and I am greatly impressed by the respect for democracy which is evident here.

J.B. Indeed so. You will have observed our General Election in which we consult the democratic will of the people.

S. I am most interested in your electoral system, Mr. Bull, and should welcome the opportunity to discuss it with you, since I am somewhat perplexed.

J.B. What is it, then, that you don’t understand?

S. Well, to begin with, I am not certain that I understand what you mean when you say that you consult the democratic will of the people.

J.B. I should have thought that was obvious, Socrates. The composition of The Commons reflects the preferences among the electorate for the various parties and candidates. This is ensured by having each and every Member of Parliament elected by a simple majority of voters in his or her constituency. It follows that if, at a General Election, the majority of the electorate favours a Conservative policy then a majority of Conservative Members of Parliament will be elected, and if, at a subsequent election, a majority favours a Labour policy, then Labour will gain a majority, and so on.

S. But is it not possible for one party to win a majority of seats whilst another receives a majority of votes? It seems to me that this would be likely if all the seats gained by the first party were won by a narrow majority of votes, whilst the second won each of its seats by a wide margin.

J.B. Now you remind me, Socrates, I must admit that such an outcome is not only possible, but actually occurred in the Spring election of last year—as I read in The Times. For some reason I

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forgot to mention it. But it is a possibility which is well known to political theorists here, and therefore, I would suggest, not worth discussing at length. What is really important is that, in any given constituency, the most popular candidate is always elected.

S. I am quite willing to restrict our further discussion to the electoral system in individual constituencies, for a clear understanding of that is as much as I can hope to gain in the space of a brief discussion. I hope you will bear with me while I ask a rather elementary question, but I am, as you know, not familiar with British political terminology. What do you mean by "the most popular candidate"?

J.B. My apologies, Socrates, but I thought that would be self-evident. The most popular candidate is the one who is considered to be the best choice by the largest number of voters, and who consequently receives the largest number of votes.

S. That seems an eminently reasonable definition to me. And conversely we could presumably define the most unpopular candidate as the one who is considered to be the worst choice by the largest number of voters.

J.B. Certainly we could, Socrates. We do not inquire of the voters in an election which candidate they consider worst: we simply invite them to state whom they consider best. Nevertheless, the one who receives the smallest number of votes is bound to be the most unpopular candidate as you defined him. The inherent fairness of the system resides in the fact that whereas the most unpopular candidate always comes last, the most popular one is always elected.

S. Please pardon me for being so slow, but what is obvious to you is not obvious to me. I am not able to analyse such abstract problems with the alacrity of relatively younger people like yourself. Perhaps a concrete example would be helpful. May we continue our discussion in terms of a hypothetical and idealised constituency?

J.B. Certainly, Socrates, if that will help you to grasp the point.

S. Well, then, let us consider a constituency with a Labour, a Liberal and a Conservative candidate, and nine voters. Suppose the Labour candidate receives four votes, the Liberal three and the Conservative two. (You can think of these figures in thousands or tens of thousands if you prefer more realism.) Let us assume further that the Labour voters, if we asked them, would all tell us that they consider the Liberal second best and the Conservative worst of the three. So the Labour voters have the following order of preference among the three candidates: (Lab, Lib, Con). Similarly, let us
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suppose that the order of preference of each of the Liberal voters is (Lib, Con, Lab) and for the Conservative voters it is (Con, Lib, Lab).

J.B. Just a minute, I’ll write that down.

S. Now we can examine your assertion that the most unpopular candidate is bound to receive the smallest number of votes. In our example, who is the most unpopular candidate? Or, following our agreed definition, which candidate is considered the worst of the three by the largest number of voters? Would you like to work it out, Mr. Bull, as you have a greater facility with figures than I?

(Pause while J.B. calculates and S. thinks.)

J.B. This is very odd. The Labour candidate appears to be the most unpopular. Five voters consider him the worst of the three, while only four consider the Conservative the worst and no one thinks the Liberal is the worst. But I assured you earlier that the most unpopular one would receive the fewest votes and that he could never be elected in Britain. Far from coming last, however, the Labour candidate has in fact won the seat. Something has gone wrong somewhere.

S. But remember, Mr. Bull, that although he is clearly the most unpopular candidate, our hypothetical winner is equally clearly the best choice. We have simply established that a candidate may be both the most popular and the most unpopular at the same time.

J.B. Obviously we have not properly defined our terms. I’m afraid, Socrates, that your definition of the most unpopular candidate must be inadequate.

S. What definition would you suggest, Mr. Bull?

J.B. Well, certain undemocratic foreign countries are ruled by a dictator, even though a great majority of the people may consider him to be the worst possible person to head the government. No individual could be elected in Britain if an overall majority of the voters in his constituency considered him to be the worst choice.

S. Yes, this certainly suggests a more stringent definition of the most unpopular candidate, namely an overall majority of the voters consider him to be the worst alternative. We must bear in mind, however, that it is possible for none of the candidates to be the most unpopular in this more stringent sense.

J.B. Quite so. Just as none of the parties necessarily gains an overall majority of seats in Parliament. But at least with our new definition we will not get an absurd result.

S. I sincerely hope not. Would you care to perform the necessary calculation on our hypothetical example, Mr. Bull?
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(J.B. calculates while S. ponders.)

J.B. I'll be damned! It's not coming out right, you know. The Liberal and Conservative voters all place Labour as their last choice. That makes five who consider the Labour candidate to be the worst, and that is an overall majority of the voters. Even with our more stringent definition the most unpopular candidate is the Labour fellow. But he's also the fellow who gets the most votes and wins the seat. But surely it's as plain as a pikestaff that you can't possibly elect the most unpopular fellow if you take a democratic vote, so we must have gone wrong again, Socrates.

S. Perhaps we need an even more stringent definition of the most unpopular candidate.

J.B. Yes, that must be it. Can you suggest anything?

S. Well, now, we have so far only taken the voters' last choices into consideration in our definitions, just as the electoral system considers only their first choices in deciding who wins. They can change their minds about the other candidates and it makes absolutely no difference to who is taken as most unpopular. But do you agree, Mr. Bull, that if we are to define the most unpopular candidate as rigorously as possible, we should take into consideration all the preferences which the voters can express?

J.B. I would most certainly agree with that.

S. We may imagine that we ask each voter to consider the candidates two at a time and state which of the two he prefers. In our hypothetical example this would require him to choose between Conservative and Labour, between Conservative and Liberal, and between Labour and Liberal. We can now formulate a most rigorous definition of the most unpopular candidate. Let us say that the Labour candidate is the most unpopular if, and only if, a majority of the voters prefers Conservative to Labour and, in addition, a majority prefers Liberal to Labour.

J.B. By Jingo, Socrates, you've got it! I knew it was only a matter of defining our terms properly and all these silly paradoxes would disappear.

S. I very much hope so, Mr. Bull. But I feel that, in order to be absolutely sure, you had better perform the necessary calculation for our example.

J.B. Let me see. All those who vote Liberal and all those who vote Conservative prefer Conservative to Labour, and that is a majority (five out of nine). All the Liberal and Conservative voters also prefer Liberal to Labour. Great Scott! The Labour candidate is still the most unpopular. Have I made a mistake somewhere?
S. Your calculations are perfectly correct, Mr. Bull. Although the Labour candidate wins the seat, a majority of the voters prefers Liberal to Labour, and a majority prefers Conservative to Labour. It seems that no matter how we define our terms it is possible for the most unpopular candidate to be elected.

J.B. Well yes, I suppose so. You seem to be right. I must admit that I find all this more than a little unsettling. But it is all theory, you know. It wouldn't actually happen in practice.

S. I am most relieved to hear you say so, Mr. Bull. Can you explain to me why this is so?

J.B. The hypothetical example you have been using is quite unrealistic. It assumes that everyone who doesn't vote Labour regards the Labour candidate as the worst of the three. In practice, of course, some of these people would consider him second best. It's all this theorising that gets us confused. We need to look at some real facts and figures.

S. But I thought you said that voters are asked only for their first choices in an election, so their second and third choices would not be known.

J.B. That is so. But I believe there is some evidence from public opinion surveys which bears on this matter. May I suggest that we call a temporary halt to the discussion? I shall go to the British Museum, look up some figures and perform some calculations. We can meet again in a week's time and resume our conversation.

S. I look forward to hearing your demonstration that the most unpopular candidate cannot plausibly be expected to win a seat in a British General Election. Until we meet again!

References


*This dialogue will be continued in the next issue of The Political Quarterly.—Eds.*