

## The Great British Donkey Race

Posted by Peter on 13 May 2010



The red donkey won again. Photo by [hddod/flickr](#)

I am sorry that there has not been a podcast for the last two weeks. We have been very busy in this country. We have had a General Election and now we have a new government.

Many countries have electoral systems that we call, in English, "proportional representation". In these systems, the number of seats which each political party has in the Parliament [reflects](#) the number of votes which they get in the election. So, if the Red Party gets 50% of the votes, it will get 50% of the seats; if the Green Party gets 20% of the votes, it will get 20% of the seats, and so on. But in Britain we think this is too easy. Our arrangements are much more fun. We have a system called "first past the post".

"What is he talking about?" I hear you say. "What is this first past the post?". Imagine a [donkey](#) race. The donkeys run round the race track. Some of them fall over. Some of them decide that donkey races are boring and stop running. But the other donkeys keep going. At the end of the race course, there is a post stuck in the ground. The first donkey that passes the [winning post](#) is the winner. All the other donkeys are losers. That is what "first past the post" means. It means that British elections are like donkey races.

Or, rather, they are like 650 different donkey races, all on the same day. Britain is divided into 650 [constituencies](#). In each constituency, the candidate who gets most votes becomes the new Member of Parliament. It doesn't matter whether he or she gets 90% of the votes or only 25% of the votes - if they get more votes than anyone else, they have won.

This is what happened in the constituency where I live. Several donkeys decided to run. There was a red donkey, who was the Member of Parliament in the old Parliament, a blue donkey, a yellow donkey and a green donkey, and a few other donkeys who knew they couldn't win but thought it might be fun to take part. The yellow donkey was the one who made the most noise. He was sure that he would win. Every day he sent us leaflets or letters to say that he was the only donkey who could beat the red donkey. Voting for the blue donkey was a waste of time, he said. She could not win. And the other donkeys? He ignored them. They did not matter.

On election night, the votes were counted. The red donkey had won again. And close behind him was - big surprise! - the green donkey, and a long way behind that was the yellow donkey. The supporters of the red donkey cheered. The supporters of the green donkey were pleased that she had done so well. And people who had bet that the yellow donkey would win had lost their money, and felt cross and foolish.

## **The Great British Donkey Race**

*Posted by Peter on 13 May 2010*

Now, I am sure that you will agree that this way of holding an election is much more fun than proportional representation. Unfortunately, it is also not at all democratic, because the "first past the post" system [favours](#) the big political parties. So, for example, in this election the Liberal Democrat party (the yellow donkey party) won 23% of the votes across the country as a whole, but has only 9% of the seats in Parliament. But, say the big parties, the "first past the post" system gives us strong, [stable](#) governments with a majority of seats in Parliament.

This election was different, however. No party will have a majority in the new Parliament. So, what would happen? The different parties started to negotiate with each other, and this gave us several more days of fun and excitement. The leader of the yellow donkeys ([Mr Nick Clegg](#)) talked first to the leader of the blue donkeys ([Mr David Cameron](#)) and then to the red donkey party and then to the blue donkey party again. (The blue donkey party and the red donkey party never talk to each other - that is a [fundamental](#) rule of British politics). Then the blue donkeys and the yellow donkeys announced that they had reached an agreement, and they would be the next government.

Will they be happy together in the same [stable](#)? Or will they soon start kicking each other? We shall see!

This is the text of the podcast at <http://www.listen-to-english.com/index.php?id=530>.