[...]

This system was in place before the development of modern political parties . These days, of course, nearly everybody votes for a candidate because he or she belongs to a particular party. But the tradition remains that an MP is first and foremost a representative of a particular locality. The result of this tradition is that the electoral system is remarkably simple, it works like this. The country is divided into a number of areas of roughly equal population (about 90.000), known as constituencies. Anybody who wants to be an MP must declare himself or herself as a candidate in one of these constituencies. On polling day (the day of the election), voters go to polling stations and are each given a single piece of paper (the ballot paper) with the names of the candidates for that constituency (only) on it. Each voter then puts a cross next to the name of one candidate. After the polls have closed, the ballot papers are counted. The candidate with the largest number of crosses next to his or her name is the winner and becomes the MP for the constituency.

And that's the end of it. There is no preferential voting (if a voter chooses more than one candidate, that ballot paper is 'spoiled' and is not counted): there is no counting of the proportion of votes for each party (all votes cast for losing candidates are simply ignored); there is no extra allocation of seats in Parliament according to party strengths. At the 1992 election, there were 651 constituencies and (651 MPs were elected. It was called a general election, and of course control of the government depended on it, but in formal terms it was just 651 separate elections going on at the same time. Here are the results from two constituencies in 1992.

	Chesterfield	**Votes**	**Taunton**	**Votes**
Conservative	Peter Lewis	9.437	David Nicholson	29.576
Liberal Democrat	Tony Rogers	20.047	Jackie Ballard	26.240
Labour	Tony Benn	26.461	Jean Hole	8.151

If we add the votes received for each party in these two constituencies together, we find that the Liberal Democrats got more votes than Conservative or Labour. And yet, these two parties each won a seat while the Liberal Democrats did not. This is because they were not first in either constituency. It is coming first that matters. In fact, the system is known as the 'first-past-the-post' system (an allusion to horse-racing).