



MVC Campaign Update: September 2006

including Party Conference Season Briefing

More favourable political landscape

Current electoral arithmetic, together with the anti-Conservative bias in the system, means there is a real prospect of a hung parliament next time; when the Liberal Democrats could use their leverage to advance the electoral reform cause. After Labour's showing at the local elections and increasing evidence of tactical unwind and even anti-Labour voting, the party is being shaken out of the false sense of security that First-Past-the-Post gave them at the general election; when their 66-seat majority could have been wiped out completely if a total of 15,000 people in the most marginal seats had voted differently.

However, we cannot just sit back hoping for a result that may or may not happen, and political machinations that may or may not bring some change in the voting system.

- We have to take the arguments to Labour and open up the debate within the party. [page 2]
- We have to raise our game to meet the opportunities that are now starting to arise. [page 3]
- We must connect with the many people around the country who don't articulate support for voting reform, but instinctively agree with our calls for "fairness", "greater choice" and a "modern democracy" + feel their votes don't count and voices aren't being listened to. [page 4]

Government's review of electoral systems - publication imminent

The review of the new electoral systems (for Scottish Parliamentary, Welsh and London Assembly and European elections) promised as part of Labour's manifesto commitments, is due out imminently. Little is yet known, except that the report has been carried out by civil servants and is "desk-based" research, without public consultation. The Department for Constitutional Affairs' closed review of electoral systems is in sharp contrast to the importance the Power Inquiry attached to seeking the views and active involvement of the public.

Democracy should not be desk-bound. Ownership of the electoral system should be in the hands of the people, as innovations like British Columbia's Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform and those proposed in David Chaytor's Electoral Choice Bill seek to achieve. Look out for an MVC call to action when the review is published: we'll want to ensure the report is built on, not buried.

Conference Season events

Make Votes Count will be having its usual prominent presence at the Party Conferences. As ever, we need help publicising the meetings locally and also leafletting delegates on the day. If you are able to assist email malcolm@makevotescount.org.uk or call the MVC office.

At **Labour**, MVC's rally / fringe is on Sunday 24 September - see p2 for further details. MVC is also helping to co-ordinate a new venture at Conference: the Democracy Groups Reception, on Tuesday 26 September 8-10pm at Bar38, Peter Street, Manchester.

At **Lib Dems**, MVC's fringe is on Sunday 17 September - see p4 for further details. MVC will also be holding a joint fringe with Electoral Reform Society at the TUC (12 Sept, 1pm-2pm, Quality Hotel, Brighton) and will be supporting the ERS/Conservative Action for Electoral Reform fringe at the **Conservatives** (3 Oct, 6pm Hermitage Hotel, Bournemouth).
1 All these events are open to the public.

Taking the campaign to the Labour Party

It is both in the party's and the country's interest to consider voting reform. Labour must not come to regret its inaction, through suffering another 18 years of Tory rule on a minority of the vote. As Neil Kinnock found, it is impossible to be honest about your support for changing the voting system when in opposition; let alone do anything about it unless you are in government.

Labour arguments for Electoral Reform

The 2005 General Election result masked the extent of the electoral pendulum swinging away from Labour and exacerbated trends of political disengagement.

→ *Democratic Deficit*

- low turnout. Questions of mandate and legitimacy. 2005 "worst election ever" [ERS]
- what if situation had been reversed?

→ *Fragility of Victory*

- marginals and rise of super marginals.
- boundary changes: only 1% swing needed for Lab to lose overall majority next time.

→ *Threat from Conservatives*

- even in 2005 Conservatives gained more votes than Labour in England, but Labour won 92 more seats.
- Labour losing votes to parties of protest, allowing Conservatives through middle.

→ *Focus on Swing Voters*

- targeting of key votes in swing seats, getting ever more scientific.
- effect on policy, messages and priorities by concentration on swing voters / seats (shifting centre rightward, neglecting issues Labour traditionally cared about).
- rational decision by those in marginal seats to vote: efficiency & feel empowered.

→ *Ignoring of Core Voters*

- marginalisation of traditional supporters & their concerns - e.g housing, employment.
- Jon Cruddas MP's question: "what type of Labour government do we want?"
- rational decision by those in safe seats not to vote - will only ever get 1 Labour MP.

→ *Democratic Deficit*

- negative effect on local campaigning effort and local party activity when constituency not 'in play'.
- Negative effect on our democracy by people's disengagement and lack of voting.

Electoral reform would help alleviate these problems and fulfil the '97 manifesto pledge

Democracy as a Labour value: expresses how fair, open and equal a society we are. Clause IV change committed Labour to putting wealth in the hands of the many, not the few. *"Our aim should be to achieve an electoral system which puts our democracy in the hands of the many voters, not the few who happen to be key in marginal seats."*

(Robin Cook, 2005)

John Denham MP at LCER AGM, 4 July 2006:

"First-past-the-post is undermining the progressive consensus that New Labour created in the 1990s, and threatening the ability to deliver progressive politics in Britain. We want to revive our appeal to all those who have backed Labour in the past 10 years in the heartlands and Labour's new territories. But first-past-the-post forces political parties to focus on a narrow group of voters who hold the key to a small number of key marginals - perhaps 30,000 voters nationally - in the much-vaunted centre ground. Only a reformed voting system, one that forces political parties to work for every vote, will provide the political stimulus we need to rebuild our struggling coalition. We can win again under first-past-the-post, but there is likely to be a cost to some of our radical aspirations. Time is running out for Labour to recognise the importance of voting reform to progressive politics in Britain."

MVC at Labour Conference, Manchester

Date: Sunday 24 September, 8pm-10pm

Venue: Manchester Art Gallery, Mosley St.

Speakers: Patricia Hewitt MP, Charles Clarke MP, John Denham MP, Michael Meacher MP, Stephen Twigg and Dr Adrian Blau.

Chair: Anne Campbell.

All welcome. No pass needed. Event is free and outside the secure zone.

RSVP: malcolm@makevotescount.org.uk

LCER has a reformers' networking and local government event on the Wednesday night 7.30pm-9pm, Midland Hotel (passholders only).

Constitutional matters that were previously mainly the preserve of 'the chattering classes' have suddenly become mainstream and gained traction. The trust issue may have a lot to do with this. Whatever the reasons, there are now many more opportunities opening up to raise the profile of electoral reform and bring it into the debate.

Lords reform

Any elections recommended are likely to be under some form of proportional system. Every political institution created in the UK since 1997 has adopted a different system than first-past-the-post for their elections, and the idea of indirect elections (touted by Billy Bragg) has not found political favour.

Party funding

Our current system actively discourages - even penalises - fighting for every vote and seat which is needed to maximise national vote share, and thus maximise state funding if such a scheme was implemented. Only when voters feel able to cast their ballot for their preferred candidates, rather than in many cases being compelled to waste their vote or vote tactically, will a truer picture of the popularity of each party emerge.

Size of Commons

The Conservatives are arguing to reduce the number of MPs. This would seem to be inconsistent with their attitude to electoral reform. One of their main defences of FPTP is the constituency link, but enlarging constituencies would increase MPs' workload and dilute that MP-constituency bond.

Compulsory voting

This sends out the wrong message to the electorate: blaming them for their often rational decision of non-voting, while failing to address any of their concerns or lack of political efficacy. The only way to justify compulsory voting would be if people believed it was worth voting and to ensure elections produced a more proportional and representative outcome.

A new Hansard Society pamphlet *Democracy and Voting* by Dr Chris Ballinger, with commentaries by Dr Ken Ritchie, Professor Helen Margetts and Dr Ben Rogers examines the subject of compulsory voting. Free launch event Thu 14 September, 6pm, Brasenose College, Oxford. RSVP hans_admin@hansard.lse.ac.uk

Devolution and the West Lothian Question

Asymmetry has always been a feature of the British constitution: Conservative MPs in England overwhelmingly determined what happened in Scotland before devolution; now it is Scottish Labour MPs determining education and health in England. Since the last general election, the 'West Lothian' or 'English Question' (as it is now referred to) has been put into sharper focus. With Labour depending for its majority on MPs from Scotland and Wales, any proposed solution which forces Scottish and Welsh MPs to abstain on Bills which deal solely with English matters may mean that Labour governments cannot get their legislation through. The underlying problem here is not voting rights, but representation. It is only because the electoral system tends to produce such a false geographic divide, under-representing Tory voters in Scotland and Wales and Labour voters in southern England, that you get into this situation in the first place. Electoral reform would smooth out some of the potential tensions.

White Paper on Local Government - due to be published this Autumn

Initiatives aimed at empowering people locally - the "double devolution" that will likely be recommended in the White Paper - should not obscure the need to improve representative democracy. Introducing some form of PR for local elections would limit the haemorrhaging of councillors and local party base that invariably affects whichever party is in power.

Strong government / coalition government

Strong government is supposedly a strength of first-past-the-post. But are more years of Thatcher-type governments or elective dictatorships really what people want? Coalitions can be the best way of incorporating majority opinion and producing a strong, stable government for the country - as is being proved in Germany and in Scotland.

Modernising our democracy

The ongoing debate is not just about systems and institutions. Voting reform would not be winning support - within parties or the public - without meeting a more fundamental, urgent demand: the need to reconnect people with politics and modernise our democracy. The electoral reform movement is well placed to contribute to the ongoing debates on turnout & engagement.

New politics

People's expectations of, and interaction with, the political process have moved on, but our institutions have not. A system that broadly reflected the votes cast would better reflect the more diverse and pluralistic society we have become; rather than the two-party, class-orientated society we once were in the 19th Century.

The voting system affects the type of politics we have and the type of campaigning that takes place. Opinion polls and anecdotal evidence all suggest the public want a more consensual, longer-term approach from politicians; leaving them better able to tackle issues like climate change and old-age provision which first-past-the-post seems conspicuously ill-suited to deal with.

Voter choice

In May's local elections turnout was generally lower in wards with fewer candidates or that were uncontested. People were more inclined to vote if they saw they had a genuine choice. Under a different voting system, parties would be much more likely to stand candidates where they do not now, as they would be looking to maximise their vote everywhere; not just in key wards. From the voters' perspective, it would shake up elections and make them more interesting; giving increased choice over whom to vote for and a much higher likelihood of affecting the result.

That is the crux: if people feel that their vote will count, they will turn out; if they feel that their vote does not matter or their voice will not be heard, they will not participate. Or they will protest vote. It is a new worrying trend that some will vote (or at least say they might) for fringe parties like the BNP, as they feel they have no other option of raising their concerns and being noticed.

Community relations

Jon Cruddas, Labour MP for Dagenham, argues that "triangulation - the way government neutralises difficult issues around race, asylum and immigration - fails to tackle the underlying problems and instead entrenches prejudices, making it tougher" in areas like his. "Policy is calibrated around the preferences and prejudices of swing voters, not [those] core voters who are taking the strain."

Women and Electoral Reform

Our electoral system is widely considered the worst for women's representation. Only one in five of our MPs is a woman, though women make up 52% of the population. First-past-the-post also lets down women voters and constituents, by limiting their choices and fostering a negative, aggressive political culture. A fair electoral system is part of the package of measures which are needed to increase the number of women elected and also to give other excluded groups the chance of fair representation.

For more information on the women's campaign - or to sign up for monthly bulletins to keep you up to date with everything in the field of women, politics and electoral reform - please contact ERS Women's Officer Christine McCartney on 020 7928 1622 or christine@reform.demon.co.uk

MVC at Lib Dem Conference, Brighton

Date: Sunday 17 September, 1pm-2pm.
Venue: Quality Hotel, West St, Brighton.
Speakers: Chris Huhne, Julia Goldsworthy and Professor John Curtice. Refreshments provided. All welcome. No passes needed.

If you are a LD member/activist, please forward on details of this event to your local party and encourage attendance.
RSVP to malcolm@makevotescount.org.uk