



MVC Campaign Update: November 2006

'Cabinet ministers call for overhaul of voting system'

That was the headline of an article in The Independent, reporting on a fringe meeting the paper organised at Labour Conference. And it was also the sentiment emerging from our own fringe meeting at Labour. Both **Charles Clarke** and **Patricia Hewitt** backed moves towards a fairer voting system.

At the Independent's fringe, **Jack Straw** had "no problem" with a move away from the traditional system for choosing MPs if it was approved by a referendum. He appeared to back a move to the alternative vote system, under which voters can express a preference for several candidates in each seat. **Peter Hain** said that Labour had to become again "the party of democratic renewal", including electoral reform of the House of Commons. **Alan Milburn** also backed a move to an alternative vote system for Westminster.

In his speech to the Progress Conference in September, **Alan Milburn** said: "New Labour .. needs to include a new, less tribal, more relaxed and open culture - where there is more dialogue and less monologue. And to give this new plural politics force we should move to a more proportional system of elections - perhaps through the alternative vote method - for both Houses of Parliament."

A Bandwagon for the Alternative Vote ?

It seems it is not just a few isolated individuals calling for change. As Ben Rogers pointed out in a Guardian article on 29 September:

"By my calculations all the leading candidates or possible candidates for the position of deputy leader - Jack Straw, Peter Hain, Harriet Harman, Hilary Benn, Alan Johnson - support either the Alternative Vote or the Alternative Vote Plus, as recommended by Roy Jenkins and his commission. Even Jon Cruddas, who has just announced that he will run, has expressed his doubts about the present system on the grounds that Labour's dominance in his Dagenham constituency means voters have no reason to turn out."

MVC welcomes all these people into the debate. It is noticeable how fewer and fewer people are prepared to come out publicly in defence of FPTP ... and that can only be a good thing. The Alternative Vote fulfils one of the main Jenkins Commission criteria: that of increased voter choice. And it does ensure winners gain more than 50% of votes cast. But AV is not a proportional system. We need to continue arguing for the democratic space for other systems to be considered and to ensure that the whole process gains legitimacy. There will no doubt be much more discussion on this topic in the coming months, and when the deputy leadership election starts for real.

Stop Press: US Mid-Term Elections. See MVC blog for analysis of the results, a discussion on the negative effects of their winner-takes-all system, and news of electoral reform ballot initiatives.

See the news section of our website www.makemyvotecount.org.uk for full reports and photos from each of our fringe meetings, including **transcripts** and **audio**.

Our fringe meetings at the main Conferences were very popular, with a fantastic 150 people at LibDems and almost 100 at Labour. The speeches and subsequent discussion help set the agenda and topical case for reform and are used to promote the campaign for the following year. This year was no exception. Key messages that emerged were:

TUC / Labour:

Electoral reform is necessary and desirable because it would ...

- avoid the country ever again suffering another 18 years of Tory rule on a minority of the vote
- create the space to discuss long-term issues such as pensions, climate change and nuclear proliferation.
- renew trust, particularly with those who voted Labour (or tactically) in 1997, when Labour offered 'to let the people decide' their own voting system in a referendum.
- discourage extremism and support for the BNP, which grows when Labour ignores its traditional voters - and their issues of poverty, jobs and social housing - in the pursuit of swing voters in marginal seats.

And ...

- Labour should not waste its strategic advantage that it is the only party with truly national support. FPTP is hastening the retrenchment of the party.
- a pre-emptive move towards electoral reform is better than having it as a political fix, whether for party advantage or in a hung parliament situation.

Lib Dem:

John Curtice threw down some challenges to the Liberal Democrats:

- that they should be ready with a considered position on electoral reform if - or, more likely, when - the time [a hung parliament] comes.
- What is the party's bottom line on electoral reform? What compromise / route to reform are they prepared to see?

Chris Huhne widened out the debate beyond the party, throwing down challenges to Labour:

- "how it is that Labour - a party that is for fairness and social justice and equality - can be committed to defending a system that is so patently unfair? There is a fundamental injustice that if you are a Labour supporter half way up the Welsh valleys, your vote does not count as much as someone in a Middle England marginal seat.
- "Labour needs to ask themselves 'how low [a share of the vote] can we go?' ... 'how low are we prepared to go ... and still consider ourselves as having a legitimate mandate and support for majority control?'"

Conservative:

MVC didn't have its own meeting but supported the ERS/CAER fringe event. Ferdinand Mount said he had turned his back on FPTP because of all the emphasis on such a small number of swing votes. There seemed more willingness to debate the issues and hear the arguments, though not necessarily agree with our analysis. A liking among people for some direct democracy measures. Conviction in constituency link, but perhaps a little bit more support for a change at local government level.

a) update

Still little emerging from the Government about its official Review of the experience of different electoral systems in the UK. The only update is from a recent Department for Constitutional Affairs Select Committee evidence session with Alex Allan, DCA Permanent Secretary. He said:

"I think most of the underlying factual information has been done. Exactly how it is pulled together & presented and what conclusions are drawn is something that is still going on. ... I think I would be rash to promise exactly when [it will be published]. There is indeed work going on within the Department ... and we will publish in line with the manifesto commitment as soon as we are able to."

Importantly, this is the first detailed on the record commitment on the Review for some time. As we thought the work has been done but the government is not sure what to do with it. 'Waiting for Gordon' might be another, more political, interpretation. Either way ...

b) democracy should not be desk-bound

The Review has been conducted as a piece of "desk-based" research, without public consultation. More importance should have been attached to seeking the views and active involvement of the public. This theme was picked up in discussions at our Labour party fringe.

Patricia Hewitt expressed her desire for more deliberative democracy initiatives, which "need to be part of how we work as a government and how we re-engage people with representative democracy." In terms of moving the electoral reform debate forward she said that "you could use a citizens assembly or an equivalent process if not to agree one preferred one way forward, to define two, or at the most I would say, three options and then that's what you take to a referendum. The very process of doing that would help achieve this larger goal of actually making parliamentary democracy a great deal more relevant to people who at the moment are reluctant voters, or not voting at all".

In another fringe, Peter Hain also said that "we should not hand down policies such as this from on high. The type of electoral reform we support should be a product of real debate in the party and in the country."

LORDS REFORM

A leaked copy of Jack Straw's Lords reform paper has been made publicly available by the Sunday Times. <http://www.times-archive.co.uk/onlinespecials//lordsreform.pdf>

The document which is merely "a discussion paper and in no way reflects government policy" recommends that elections to the second chamber should be conducted under partially-open regional lists, based on the European constituencies. There is an appendix at the back which goes through all electoral options: FPTP, partially-open lists, closed lists and STV. The document says that FPTP produces "distorted results" and lists a further four flaws with that system. We shall be keeping a close watch on developments in the coming months.

HUNG PARLIAMENTS

a) academic perspective

At our fringe meetings, both Professor John Curtice and Dr Adrian Blau shared their perspective on the likelihood and consequences of a hung parliament at the next election, mapping out possible scenarios and routes (and obstacles) to electoral reform. Adrian Blau also issued a note of caution to reformers: urging us to challenge our assumptions and not hold out for a hung parliament to bring reform. You can read more about what they said on our website.

b) Clare Short

Much discussion in the press and within the Labour party about Clare Short's decision to stop taking the Labour Whip in the Commons and to stand down at the next election, citing her desire to see a hung parliament and to promote electoral reform. In an interview in the Independent she explained that:

"a hung parliament is likely and could lead to electoral reform, which is key to correcting the arrogant, error-prone concentration of power in No 10. No one can ensure that we get a hung parliament, but we should embrace the prospect and not be scared of it. We need more robust systems of accountability. In particular I favour a parliament with parties represented in proportion to their vote which would create governments that had to be more responsive to public and parliamentary opinion."

Much to agree with here, though - as stated already - you cannot actually campaign for a hung parliament. Also we should not hold out hope that such a situation would deliver us a campaign victory. But Clare's intervention has certainly provoked good public debate and many comments in favour of electoral reform, including on this continuing strand on the BBC Newsnight blog: www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/newsnight/2006/09/would_a_hung_parliament_be_good_for_britain.html

For a response to Labour party criticisms about what they see as Clare's treachery, read the 'Short-ed' post on our blog www.makemyvotecount.org.uk/blog/archives/2006/10/shorted.html

TAKING THE CAMPAIGN FORWARD

- organise a speaker for a party meeting
- host a debate or education session on electoral reform with a local community group or at a community event
- distribute literature on voting reform
- sign up supporters on a campaign stall
- write letters to your local newspaper
- blog or podcast for reform
- recommend our website and blog www.makemyvotecount.org.uk - which is updated almost daily to highlight the dynamic nature of the campaign.

Make Votes Count can offer campaign advice and supply materials to help you engage and involve others. MVC may also be able to provide a speaker or suggest possible people for you to ask.

Make Votes Count - the campaign for a more representative voting system

Supported by: Charter88, Christian Socialist Movement, Conservative Action for Electoral Reform, Electoral Reform Society, Fawcett Society, Green Party, Liberal Democrats, Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform, New Politics Network, Plaid Cymru and X-Change. MVC also has over ten thousand individual supporters.

www.makemyvotecount.org.uk