



MAKE VOTES COUNT GREEN PARTY FRINGE 2007

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Prospects for PR: Responding to Brown's constitutional reforms

JEAN LAMBERT MEP:

Make Votes Count is an organisation the Greens have been involved with almost since its inception. And because apart from what we can hope will be the electoral benefit to us from a change in the electoral system there is also a feeling that it's the right thing to do anyway, to open up the electoral system to make it more representative, to have more people's voices heard within it, and that it's a democratic benefit, to put it mildly.

And to start with, after my first election in 1999 sort of being congratulated by various people, one of whom – you may have heard me say this before – but who found himself in tears, saying this is the first time in 30 years anybody I voted for has ever been elected. I have this feeling that if the electoral systems make candidates cry, that's one thing, but to make voters cry is not really what they should be for. So, that's also another of the things about how it actually makes voters feel. That sometimes they can win. And I think that's important.

There has been a lot of talk recently about Labour's manifesto commitment on the referendum on the changes at the European level, European Treaty, constitution, whatever we're calling that. But of course one of the early promises from labour in its 1997 election manifesto was for a referendum on the electoral system for Westminster. And there was a commission set up to look at that chaired by Roy Jenkins that actually brought forward their own report which certainly made the case for change in the electoral system at the Westminster level. Many of us in the voting reform movement were less than enthused about the system that they came forward with and were told at the time, well, it was something that, you know, Tony Blair could support, and we thought well, that's nice that Tony can support it, the rest of us have a bit more trouble. But nevertheless, it was making the case for change. And it was a real pity, I think, that we never got to a referendum on that. So you'll forgive me if I didn't get too excited about other referendum offers that we've had since. So it was very clear, as I say, the Jenkins Report, there's a lot in it which made it very clear that the current system doesn't work.

And so there's a question now about are we getting new mood music from the new Prime Minister? What are the possibilities for change going on here? Well, certainly the mood music is different in terms of some democratic engagement. Gordon Brown appears to be much more comfortable with even talking about that than Tony Blair ever was. For Blair, he was doing it because a lot of people in his cabinet had been convinced of the arguments for change, not least by the very radical work done by organisations like Charter 88. And we're seeing some very positive things come through there. Gordon Brown seems certainly a lot more comfortable with the language of engagement than the language of involvement. And he was saying not long after his election as the Labour Party leader that,

all the big challenges we face, the environment, he mentioned it there, raising education standards, building better communities, can only be met by directly involving and engaging the British people in their solution. And we thought, mmm, this is interesting and there was a few words in it that people got a bit more excited about, thinking ah, doesn't that mean electoral reform? But as so often, you know, the foreplay is more interesting than what follows.

But nevertheless we've now got from this government the Green Paper which makes, I think, very interesting reading and in some ways very disappointing reading, Green Paper on the governance of Britain, where again he's talking about, you know, a shared national purpose, a strong bond between people and government. We can't meet the challenges of today's world - and I think that's quite important for Greens to pick him up on that particular point, that we can't meet the challenges of today's world without, you know, this strong bond between people and government. And then you read through what's actually in there and there's quite a lot of very interesting stuff for us as Greens in many ways, I think. That you know, one of the things he talks about is the use of public petitions, and I was on the petitions committee in the European Parliament for a while and have seen how that can actually work as a very positive sort of tool of government. Scotland has a petitions committee. But he's talking about, trying to work out the roles and responsibilities of national government versus local government. The possibility of a new sort of settlement or whatever there. Issues about a public contract, public charter between service providers and citizens. You know, whatever that means.

And there's a whole lot of very interesting stuff but then you start looking for, well, yes, but the crux of the matter, who gets elected, who are the people making a lot of these decisions? I think we've got a slightly sort of disappointing, to put it mildly, sort of section in there. That in the reinvigorating our democracy part, part three of this, you know, there's talk about Lords reform and the agreement of the House of Commons that basically, you know, this is an elected House of Lords. But it's silent on how will the House of Lords be elected. This is obviously something the public's not particularly going to be engaged within.

There's a section on representation that talks about the importance of carrying on with the work of making sure that there are more women in parliament, and the possibility of extending women-only shortlists, extending the life of those. It also talks about the importance of increasing the number of people from ethnic minorities that are represented in parliament. And maybe the shortlist system there. And you think, but you're missing a point here, and it doesn't make the case for actually if you change the electoral system itself that can be a way to increase and develop the proper representation within parliament of different sections of people who are entitled to vote and indeed to stand. And Keith Vaz had a letter in the Guardian recently, again on sort of like ethnic minority representation and how important this was in Westminster. And you're thinking, Keith, let me explain this to you very simply: change the electoral system, this can assist change. Then it depends what system you go for, how you organise it, but something we've always said about multi-member constituencies, whether that's lists, whether it's single transferable vote, is that if you're putting forward a group of candidates from your party, the electorate starts looking at who is not in your group of candidates, and therefore, you

know, the electorate starts to expect to see a wider range of people standing. And I think this is going to be a challenge for the Conservatives with the next European Election. They currently have one woman, one woman in the European Parliament. It was two, one of them went to Westminster, so hallelujah, I don't think she doubled the representation of Conservative women there but she certainly helped the numbers.

And then you read about election day and you think, oh, is this the section in your paper that's going to talk about the electoral system? No, it's actually talking about which day should be election day, and Sunday, Thursday, well it's important, but it misses the point again. And when we do get to the electoral system itself what we get there is a commitment that they will actually now publish the review by the end of the year, of the electoral systems operating in the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, London and so on. And there's a view that certainly that review was done quite some time ago, it's been sitting on a shelf not having been published for ten months. I don't quite understand why that should be. Maybe they don't look on some of their shelves. But it will be out. And then there's no commitment really to do anything with that, to make any sort of statement about what the results of that will be or how they're going to move forward.

What we have got, however, is a view that there will be a Speaker's conference. And what that's saying is, 'a Speaker's conference to unite the parties in search of solutions to the disengagement of people from the electoral process. A Speaker's conference brings together all the parties at Westminster.' Okay. 'To look at issues that can only be dealt with on a cross-party basis. And he's saying I'm proposing to the Speaker he calls a conference to consider against the background of a declining turnout a number of important issues such as electoral registration, weekend voting, the representation of women and ethnic minorities in the House of Commons.' And what's missing is the voting system itself.

So there is going to be, I think, a lot more talk and a lot more discussion about the nature of government, who's in government, all of these sorts of things. How do we engage people at the local level, how do we pick up on the results of the Power Inquiry? But still at the centre of it is going to be this great gaping hole which is not going to deal with the current disproportional electoral system that we have which distorts then the decisions which are actually made in parliament, which means that that isn't representing even necessarily the views of those who went out and voted, never mind those who didn't bother to vote because they thought it would make no difference or they wouldn't get the candidate of their choice elected. Therefore we need to be taking every opportunity we can in responding to the Governance of Britain document to make the case for electoral reform in that, and if that's not dealt with at Westminster, you know, the sort of so-called heart of government, that there is still going to be a distortion in absolutely everything else that stems from there, and that it's a crucial and missing element at the moment of the discourse which is actually coming from the current Prime Minister. But at least he is sort of opening a door part-way that for those of us interested in electoral reform, for all sorts of reasons, actually you know, we have to pick up that challenge, to really get involved in that debate and make the case with the public and with the Prime Minister and parliament for that change. So that's right, Gordon, what are you going to do about this hole in the centre of government? Make Votes Count has got some ideas on what we do to actually campaign on this and renew our energy on this issue.

MALCOM CLARK (Make Votes Count):

I was at Green spring conference earlier this year and have been here since yesterday, and I've been quite enjoying just sitting down listening to discussions on the motion about STV and how you're going to vote on different things. I've been hearing – there were bits of discussion on systems, but actually I'm not going to talk about systems,

Make Votes Count is trying to phrase some of the language and the debate when we're talking about electoral reform in things other than just saying we are campaigning for PR, full stop. Because it's quite useful to actually start thinking, , why are we doing this, and how is our campaign being perceived by politicians in Westminster and people outside? Because, , what I often get from politicians is – and in particular the Labour government, saying oh, but I'm not hearing this issue on the doorstep. , no one's coming up to me and talking about electoral reform. And it's like, well, okay, if you come here or to many other places, actually there are people who are doing it. But much more than that, they may not be saying proportional representation but they are talking about all the issues behind it, all those things about, 'my vote isn't going to count, why should I bother turning out? Why do I only see you at election time, and why do I not even see you at election time, if this isn't a seat campaigning for?' , 'why are you not discussing my issues, whereas these issues that might play well in other areas are more talked about?' So I'm throwing out a challenge to particularly a group like we have here, who are very keen on the principles of electoral reform and probably – not everyone here but a lot of us know something about systems, but at the same time it's about how do we phrase the debate in a way that is accessible to people and actually will make politicians as well think and the government think, yes, these are the issues that we're talking about? Because it is.

Someone about a week ago phrased a wonderful question to me: what would it look like if you achieved your aims, if your campaign was successful? And actually just sort of coming here and reading through the Green literature, seeing some of the phrases used, as a party you're very comfortable, much more so than some of the other political parties, in talking about not just values but talking about, expressing the sort of diverse society, consensual decision making of politics. , fair representation and all these other issues of a modern, accountable system. Power devolved downwards and decentralised. The other parties are only slowly catching up. I was at a Labour Party event, Fabian Society event, last weekend, and they were just starting to talk much more, people much more comfortable expressing some of these ideals. So I think as a party and as just activists on the ground, you should be proud about using these terms when discussing the issues and relating them to electoral reform.

We've done in Make Votes Count and the Electoral Reform Society some interesting focus groups about a year or so ago ... and from that we'd started developing our own language of accountability, modernising democracy, making parties take you more seriously and compete for your vote, all those kind of things that sort of take it onto a level that actually people are talking about and not simply just saying, PR, PR, that's it. And so that's why I know some of you here and other people not in this room have stopped me and gone, looking at the Make Votes Stand over there, where does it talk about PR? Are you the campaign for PR? It's yes, we are. But , as a challenge, how do we talk about these things?

And looking ahead, there are two big issues on the horizon. One is connected with all these things that Gordon Brown has, or rather hasn't been saying yet. That missing thing in the constitutional reform agenda, the missing thing about electoral reform, that not only is it not there, they seem to be actively trying to stop it being talked about, whether it's in the review that has been written, or at least drafted but not yet published, whether it's in this Speaker's conference, electoral reform as well as a couple of the other issues are not mentioned and our challenge is to make sure that these issues are discussed, and particularly when the review is, I say is, hopefully finally published in November, December this year. We've got to get the message out about that it's all very well this review has happened but the review of the different electoral systems didn't consult us. As far as we're aware there's been no public consultation, no public involvement or debate on these issues, but it's only been those people with a vested interest, the party officials and the MPs and other politicians who actually had their chance to input into that debate so far. And Brown's big failing and where we've really got to get the message out is actually we, the people, it's our voting system, it's our politics, what do we want from it, and let's have a proper dialogue, and that, so come kind of the end of the year that certainly I think Make Votes Count will be engaged in sort of campaigning activity hopefully across the country on that.

Looking ahead slightly further .. to the London GLA elections, the mayoral elections in 2008. There's a good opportunity for us to actually talk about the benefits of electoral reform, of seeing votes count whether people live in west London, south London, north London, east London, that actually they get their say and a much better chance of having representation that they want. And so that's again something that we need to – it's an opportunity, particularly for those in London and the south east to talk about those issues.

And to celebrate the successes that we've actually had in Scotland and Wales this year. I mean, sometimes in the electoral reform movement we're shy about talking about what's actually happened and celebrating successes. So we had in Scotland the local elections were done the first time by single transferable vote in May, and parliamentary elections, it was the third time that they'd been conducted as well under a form of PR. And all we seem to hear in the national media, at any rate, immediately afterwards, 'ah, it's been terrible and there's all these wasted votes,' and that. And yes, there were problems, particularly with the parliamentary ballot papers, not just in the counting but the way they were set out. And the added confusion that people had in trying to deal with two systems, particularly one new system on the same day, didn't work as well as it should have done. But at the same time, overall people suddenly found that they had a point to turning out in local elections particularly, that, parties that had controlled councils for umpteen many years, power changed hands. And in the Scottish Parliament it's the first time in Scotland that Labour has lost an election there since 1955, and we're always told, , oh, PR, you can never kick them out, it's only first-past-the-post that can – actually, good example, PR in Scotland has enabled people there to change who's governing them. And in Wales again it's opened up whole different possibilities, I mean, several months of amazing possibilities that then filtered into what is in Wales at the moment. But at least it gave a chance for the parties to actually start talking to each other and realise that they have similarities and could work

together, even if in the end we don't have that situation. Well, yes, we do, we've got Labour and Plaid in Wales. So there are positives that we just don't hear about in the media.

My final point is on the issue of local elections and making local votes count. It is a complicated pattern of different elections and slightly different ways that we vote all across England, but there are quite a lot of possibilities for introducing PR for local government, and certainly it's something that quite a lot of parties – even, strangely enough, the Conservative Party in Wales starting talking about PR for local government around the time of the Assembly elections there in May. So there are quite a few kind of parties out there talking about these issues, and there are some very practical things that political activists can do, and one of them has actually been done in a city, which is that Liverpool Council, it's a Lib Dem controlled council, but a few years ago they passed a motion in support of changing their local council elections to STV, and that was actually a campaign that was run in conjunction with Make Votes Count and a whole array of councillors and people from different political parties, and is something I think that the Greens here, or several people from the Greens got involved in. Unfortunately it's not – , hit some buffers, partly because the Labour – certainly John Prescott, when he was in charge of this particular aspect stopped, , didn't give any one of these councils a chance to have pilots, and also because local politics here isn't as clear as it should be on progressing that motion. But there are different ways that activists can get involved in the campaign, both on the national level but also on a local level as well.

Audience Questions / Comments:

Anon:

I'm from Gloucester. One thing I find on the doorstep is people say politicians are all the same. That's the one response you didn't really make much of. It's one of the more common ones. And on the reform of the Lords into the picture, I would really like it see it taken out of the hands of political parties altogether. I would like to see people who go in being people from communities who've been given awards for their community service.

Chris (Norwich Green Party):

One of the main reasons put against PR is the idea of coalition of government or hung government or whatever. Personally I think there are a lot of positives about how ... Norwich... the council there has worked for the last two or three years. It's absolutely striking the difference between – the urban council between three stroke parties, including the Greens and for example Norfolk County Council which is about two thirds Tory. So my first point is that we should really work at trying to promote that sort of government.

Christine Clark:

I've been asked on the doorstep lots of times, 'well it's no use voting for you because they always get in.' The Labour Party actually in council and it's the town council in Moseley and they always have a massive majority and I stand in both for the town council and for the local council. I often wonder what would happen once you get coalition so it's really good to hear from Norwich that it's working, as I really am concerned about that.

PANEL RESPONSES / CLOSING REMARKS:

MALCOLM CLARK

Lords reform, where are we? It's a very good interesting question considering I sat by the TV and was celebrating in my office obviously rather prematurely when we had the votes in March and it went 80% elected and even a hundred percent elected passed. And Brown got elected and on Day One my heart sank possibly more on that issue than on electoral reform simply because he seems to really enjoy bringing in those outside people into government, which is very good in one sense, but how does he do it to the process of appointment? At the moment you get several big name Labour MPs are stepping down and all the comment in the papers, I mean yesterday I think it was Richard Caborn, the former sports minister, and the one comment in the paper at the end of it was, 'and it is expected that he'll go to the Lords.' Not a comment afterwards saying 'if it hasn't been reformed by then.' I think it's very telling. My guess is they'll be manifesto commitments.

In terms of Make Votes Count. What we've been strongly campaigning for is again this whole idea of public consultation or involvement in deciding in the voting system. At the moment it was a ... mainly closed party A list system proposed by Jack Straw and then there's been complaints from other parties about it and it's not necessarily to get involved in the systems debate, but more so on such an important change we need the public. It's not the vested interested, the prime minister or anyone else in it and that's certainly where we'll campaign on. I guess partly it's lobbying and things like that internally. On the MVC stalls there's actually a postcard campaign that's been going on for a few months to be sent to your local MPs precisely on that issue and that's been sent in by quite a lot of MVC activists to their MPs and we've got responses back which has both helped in terms of the Lords reform campaign but also in terms of us knowing where MPs in the party stand on the different systems and things like that.

As I say there is this demand from the politicians and the Labour government to say we need to hear about electoral reform from the doorstep or in our mail bags for it to be taken seriously as an issue and so that's the next step.

JEAN LAMBERT

It's interesting that electoral reform is something David Cameron never talks about. Maybe we should try and arrange a few questions for his Quality of Life group as one of the things that might help the quality of life would be a change in the diversity of representation.

For next conference perhaps we should invite some of the Scottish Greens to come and talk to us about their experience and how it worked and what we could be doing with that. And on the point about not being heard on the doorsteps. It does seem to me that there's scope there for a whole sort of letting writing thing about well I probably won't see you on my doorstep in the next election 'cause it's a safe seat, so can I ask your opinion now about the chance of electoral reform and what you're doing about the Lords and to get a lot of our activists doing that.