



FAIR VOTES, FAIR FUNDING: PROSPECTS FOR PR

MATTHEW OAKESHOTT (Chair):

We thought we would make this meeting a little different from the usual just calling for fair votes or reform. We thought we would link it to fair votes and fair election funding. Because when we're seeing Michael Ashcroft, in particular, trying to buy the next election already, pouring money into seats, this sort of issue is vital for democracy as well. I've just really got one message for my colleagues, in the Lords and elsewhere, who are now inside Brown's big tent: we do hope very much that as part of whatever advice you're giving, or constitutional cooperation if you like, we hope you will argue very firmly that this is going to mean nothing, this cooperation, unless we have progress on serious constitutional reform, and in particular reform of our rotten voting system and our unfair system of party funding. So I will be suggesting that that's one of the issues that he [Brown] is seriously going to have to take up.

JO SWINSON MP:

When Gordon Brown came to the dispatch box with his very long wish list of things that he wanted to change about the constitution there was quite a few of us there in Parliament, and I suspect many of us in this room here today, who were actually quite excited that it seemed like we'd finally got a Prime Minister that recognised that there are things that needed to change. Whether it's stripping the powers that the prime minister has had and giving those back to Parliament, or some of the perhaps more recent ideas like citizen juries, there has certainly be a lot of discussion around constitutional issues. But one of the disappointing things, has been that we still seem to have made no progress with getting Gordon Brown to understand that the voting system also needs to be looked at. In fact, it used to be that there were media reports that he might seriously be looking at the system of the Alternative Vote, but they've rather been played down of late. So there is a very serious message to be pushed to Gordon Brown about the importance of electoral reform.

The Scottish experience of this is quite useful to look at. We now have four different voting systems in Scotland, which get better the later they were introduced. So we've obviously got the First-Past-the-Post system, which is still used for the Westminster elections. A little bit later we then got the European list system, which obviously is the same down south as well. But then when the Scottish Parliament was set up we got a new sort of hybrid system, where some MSPs are elected in constituencies and then we have regional lists which are topped up on a proportional basis to make the distribution of MSPs between the parties much fairer. There are many problems with this system, but we can still agree that it's better than the First-Past-the-Post and list systems. And we've managed to continue this cycle of progress - the result of Liberal Democrats using their influence in government - to make sure that we have STV for local government elections, which took place for the first time under that system in May of this year.

So with four different voting systems some confusion might be understandable for voters, but I don't think anybody had quite predicted the debacle that we saw at the Scottish elections.

You'll have seen the figures as well, and the shock of 140,000 spoiled ballot papers. When you bear in mind that the population of Scotland is about a tenth of the size of the UK as a whole, the scale of that becomes very apparent indeed. There has been talk about a crisis of confidence in our electoral system for that reason, and there is an inquiry looking into this issue which we hope will report back some findings to restore that faith and confidence. It certainly seems that government ministers have been far from innocent in their actions. It seems that they made the decision to programme the electronic counting machines to automatically reject certain types of ballot papers with no human adjudication whatsoever. Which the first time that electronic counting was being used, I think was a very wrong decision for them to make indeed. And even worse, they did not actually make public that they had taken this decision. It seems that some voters were confused by two ballot papers being put in one. Because you had a Scottish Parliament ballot paper, which had previously been two separate papers, was printed with the left hand column voting on the list and the right hand column voting for your constituency. So you have to put one X in each list. And this did cause confusion because some people put two Xs in the first column and none in the second column or vice versa. It's not until the commission reports that we will know exactly what happened.

But one thing that we should definitely remember about the Scottish elections is that we cannot blame PR for the problems. We can't blame PR for the problem of ballot papers being laid out in a way that was not easy for voters to understand. The spoilage rate in the Scottish Parliament elections was about seven per cent, and in the STV local government elections on the same day the spoilage rate was two per cent. So when people say it's too confusing, that voters can't possibly bear in mind how to write 1, 2, 3 4, in fact voters can and they did manage to do that quite well. The problem with the Scottish elections was actually to do with the ballot papers which has to be got right for next time and it may well be that having two different systems on the one day is not a sensible way forward. I would certainly argue that we should actually just move the Scottish Parliament elections to STV as well and then it would be nice and simple for everybody to understand. I suspect the government won't necessarily be following that advice. But whatever happens just remember that where those two systems are used in conjunction it was the STV system that voters found easier to understand.

And what has the result of this been in Scotland? Well, in many parts of Scotland there has been a complete Labour dominance in local government across the country for decades. I always say to people I wouldn't like Liberal Democrats to have that level of dominance. It isn't healthy for governance where you have a council where 90% of the seats are Labour, even if they get 55% of the vote That kind of dominance which for example Labour have had in Glasgow City Council is not healthy democracy because you don't get the type of opposition and keeping people on their toes and the scrutiny that is so important. So we now have just two of Scotland's 32 authorities under outright control of one party and those are Labour councils, including Glasgow, but as there 50% of people are voting Labour that's fair. At least Labour have a strong opposition with a variety of different councillors who are able to hold them to account. The other 30 councils therefore have power sharing going on and we have some very strange relationships ... and sometimes we're working with the SNP.

But in some areas we did better than others. One thing we ought to bear in mind when talking about STV for local government is it's not necessarily going to be wonderful for our party. We argued for wards with five members or more. Labour managed to get that down to three or four members depending on the different wards and in fact in a lot of areas that's actually just three member wards. You don't get the same kind of proportionality with that. And so in areas where

we've traditionally done well like in my area and in Aberdeenshire and Fife we lost some seats from that, but that was balanced by other areas where we previously had no representation. Places like deepest darkest Ayrshire where we now have two Liberal Democrats on the council, enough to second a motion so that's a good result.

In the previous term of the Scottish Parliament we ended up with six party politics: Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat, SNP, Nationalist and Socialist plus Independents. Of the 129 MSPs 18 of them, about 15% were actually not of one of the main four parties. This time round, with a big squeeze from the SNP, that's dropped to three out of 129, but it still does mean that in councils and in Parliament we have a much more open system of politics. People have more of a chance to have their views heard and different parties actually have success, which will not always be good for Liberal Democrats but I think is a good thing for democracy in terms of that opening up politics. Now whether or not Gordon Brown can be convinced that that's the case we will have to wait and see, but we need to be making sure that we're making that case loudly and strongly.

SUE DOUGHTY:

Quite often with Liberal Democrats we spend a lot of time actually looking at very, very narrow majorities. Often we win not because we put more money in, but we put more passion, with our supporters working harder than the opposition does. On the other hand we quite often have struggles because other parties have greater discipline. In Surrey, which is not quite a Conservative one party state but does its best to be, if you want to stand for the council for the Conservatives you pledge to go and work in Guildford and I think you have to put in eight hours work in Guildford just in order to be allowed to stand anywhere else in Surrey. So these are quite important things we have to remember and they do impact on democracy. In my case I failed to win Guildford by 347 votes despite gaining 22,500 votes, which is more than two-thirds of the elected members in the House. I'm in no doubt whatsoever that had there been any form of proportional representation I would certainly have been elected, especially given the strength of the Green and the Labour votes in Guildford which we did try and squeeze.

I think one of the problems we've got is how to make all of this attractive. We know it's right, there's a justice argument about why we need a fairer voting system. But when people compare the UK with what is happening internationally, they often think we've got such good democracy here. And I think this is what we tend to be up against. And also this argument about whether English people are actually capable of putting 1, 2 3 down on a piece of paper and what would happen to their little hands if they were expected to do this. And how many people really even care? People are confused about what it is they want. And with PR they aren't marching on the streets, so it's not like Make Poverty History where we've got this big movement of people who say fundamentally this is wrong and we can do better. They don't say: "what do we want? Fair votes. When do we want it? Now."

We've got a lot of challenges to excite people which are on the current agenda, including House of Lords reform. The fact is that we are now beginning not only to talk about a majority elected house but about what mechanism we want, how many people we want in that body, how long we want them serving. And that has to be a good thing. I know all our Liberal Democrat MPs and peers are of one mind that they do not want to be there on privilege; they want to be there on merit and elected merit.

If you have multi-member constituents and wards how that would work? When I was elected in Guildford the electoral constituencies at Guildford are not the same as the borough and I walked into this one party state with all my elbows sticking out, saying give me room. Anybody who's a councillor in a mixed ward who finds they're doing the casework for the whole ward knows it is incredibly, incredibly demanding, particularly where I believe what enriches MPs is in fact the constituency link. What makes MPs better at doing their job is actually the strength and feeling you're seeing amongst your constituents. And most of our MPs won their seat and have held their seats not by trying to be all things to all men but listening to their constituents very hard. And if you're one MP in a multi member group of constituencies this makes it much harder.

So we have a lot of challenges here. One final thing I want to say is we have to actually get our politics much better. Those that have been trying to select council candidates in the last year, you say to someone do you want to be a candidate, they run a mile because it's demanding. I think that a lot of people have to be put right about what we want elected representatives to do, not just run helter-skelter into ideal perfect situations without actually having worked out the practicalities on the ground and what happens when you're elected in this way.

LORD (ARCHY) KIRKWOOD:

Can I just start by saying that Make Votes Count have been doing wonderful service across the country for British politics for some time and they are an excellent organisation because they are always around at the right time at the right place saying the right thing. In 18 months or so the role that they have played will become, if anything, even more important, because votes might count in a different way if Sir Hayden Phillips' talks mature, because you might be getting pence per vote as well as added value for your vote from a political point of view. So the timing of this meeting and talking about state funding in terms of constitutional reform and new electoral systems is all I think part and parcel of the same very important part of our constitutional reforms that we're facing.

Party politics is good for you is something that we must start arguing much more energetically. I think that the whole idea of anti-politics has gathered pace. I think the idea of competing for votes and having a representative elective democracy making decisions for the community is being diminished, demeaned and attacked at all turns by particularly the tabloid press commentators, the commentariat and the rest. And we've got to fight to establish the fact that it's an honourable position to be an elected representative of communities which we seek to serve.

Paying for proper investment in those systems at a local level is going to be an essential part of the future of the democracy of this country, because we are at a tipping point. As the number of activists dwindle because they get fed up because they're getting demeaned and attacked and downtrodden, as they get older, like me, the more that happens the less room there is for people to do the work. So it's a dwindling number of people who are doing the essential activism at a local level to keep the business going and to find the next generation of activists. And it's my view quite simply that if we don't put in state funding in a sensible way then I think that the tipping point will be past and we will end up with an almost American style situation where party politics is reduced to branding at elections for no other purposes than getting self perpetuating elites elected. There might be 35% turnout but you'll still have a Home Secretary dispensing justice down to the United Kingdom and that is not a situation that we can possibly allow to continue.

The idea of state funding isn't new. But one of the problems about state funding discussions at a national and political level is it all seems to be about mechanics. It all seems to be about how you do it, how you proceed to get a fair incidence of public spend across the political horizon in a way that is fair. Nobody actually talks about the why. That is a mistake and in the next 18 months we've got to try and get our arguments into the marketplace and argue why it is good to invest sensibly in public structures of party democracy.

Why is it essential? Firstly, if it's done sensitively we can clean up party politics. But secondly I think we do have to argue the case to people that reinvigorating local politics is essential if we're going to have a democratic process left that's worth the description at all. All the existing support, and there's about £90 million roughly speaking that is already in the system, is all covert. It's all party broadcasting or it's freepost or is policy funding, policy development funding or it's Short money. It's all in a corner. It's all quiet. None of us are prepared to go out there and actually say that tax payers money should be used to promote a healthy competition in the ballot box at elections at every level throughout the United Kingdom. We've got to decide on what we are spending this money as well as how we spend it and I hope that we as a party, if we get the chance will do that. And I also think just in passing that we've got to be careful we don't end up restricting the scope of with which any public funds can be devoted. Because there's a real reason to fear that because it's all too difficult we'll just get it for education or increasing activism or citizen's juries or any damn thing you like. Anything but real red blooded politics. And I think that that's something that we've got to guard against.

The Hayden Phillips talks are still going. That is the good news. They are protracted and drawn out and they are delayed, but they're still going. There are three parties talking. We have actually got to the stage where there's now a draft agreement; though I wouldn't put my life savings on the fact that it will mature into a formalised agreement. It's at a very high level. It's got five or six elements in it. It's got donations and that's surrounding the question of trade union affiliations and how they should be countered. There's the question of spending controls and the current thoughts are about a five year spending plan that looks at core spending plus and election premium over a five year period. There will be exemptions within those spending limits so that parties can for example play for capital expenditure and normal commercial loans and pension funds and the likes. When you get into the fine print of that we'll see some of the exemptions. There are two other things that you should know about. There would be a whole new process of regulation. I think the Electoral Commission is going to be substantially recast as a kind of equivalent FSA/Ghost Busters kind of operation. So if you get a problem with one of your opponents you know who to call and I hope that that works because the present system certainly doesn't. And finally there will a very long transitional process to get to where we want to be, like 2012 by which time I'll be dead and buried politically. But there's a lot of argument to come.

But the final word from me is that this an important debate. That we've got to make sure that this is not just about mechanical means of propping up party mechanisms with restrictions on what the money can be deployed for. We have got to be determined about this and say if state funding is not done, deployed and spent and invested in re-invigorating local party democracy the whole constitutional debate that's going continue which is important will be as of nothing because elites will continue to contest elections and govern, and the rest of the British public will be watching television.

CHRIS HUHNE MP:

I agree so much with what Archy said about the importance of party politics and the honourable nature of the trade of getting elected in order to represent people and to try and resolve their problems. Having spent nineteen years as a journalist I didn't think there were many professions which were held even lower in public esteem than journalism, but it is true, sadly, that politics is. This is an immensely corrosive problem for particularly progressive parties. The degree of disengagement, the degree of distrust, the cynicism of our politics and politicians. Even though basically people come into politics for public service and they want to help and they want to serve. But the degree of public disaffection and distrust and disengagement I think is enormous and is deeply, deeply damaging. And it's deeply damaging particularly if you are a party like the Liberal Democrats, or perhaps the Labour Party, that is actually out to change the country rather than merely to run the country. Because you need to have faith in the talks. You need to have faith that the state can deliver change if you're going to motivate people to support you. And if people feel that degree of disengagement I think it's very worrying for the future, particularly of progressive politics. And that's why it's so important that Gordon Brown addresses the whole set of issues around how to breath back faith in the political process.

The funding issue is absolutely crucial because it is so dishonest. In Eastleigh I was at the receiving end at the last election of the third highest amount of funding and spending after Michael Howard and David Davis. For example £16,000 was spent three months before the election on sending all the key swing voters a DVD which they could play about how marvellous my Conservative opponent was, completely funded locally, completely outside the limits of expenditure. No need to account for it or indeed control over what was actually in it. The truth is that people like Michael Ashcroft were buying elections in this country. Let's be clear that this is every bit as offensive as the way in which people bought elections back in the bad old days of the rotten boroughs and we have to make that point. We need clear limits on funding and that it's related to the local party because it's so important that people feel that they have control over the political process. This isn't something that's being imposed from on high or from Westminster, but actually it's something that the local electorate actually controls.

On the issue of electoral reform, it is of course an outrage that people can buy elections under First-Past-the-Post. It's an outrage too that First-Past-the-Post has such extraordinarily unfair results. What sort of electoral system is it? We go into the ballot boxes, we vote, 35% vote for one political party which is the Labour Party and yet it wins 55% of the seats in the House of Commons. How can one conceivably justify that as a democrat in terms of reflecting the choices which the country actually made at the election. And we have to challenge those who want to defend this electoral system with a very simple question. If 35% is legitimate, how low does it go before it becomes illegitimate? Are you prepared to see a majority government elected in this country with only 32% of the vote or 29% of the vote? Surely there has to be a minimum figure which is the figure necessary to give an overall majority to a government. And in Ireland under STV it would be around 45% and that would be similar under the Jenkins AV+ proposals. And it seems to me essential that we move back to a position where the voters know if they go into the polling booths that what is going to come out at the end of the day is something which broadly reflects the preference which they've passed.

It's unfair in another fundamental way too, because the voter in Reading is worth far more to a political party than the voters in the Rhonda Valley. Where you live determines how effectively you are represented in this democracy and that cannot be right. It cannot be right that 800,000 people living in the middle England marginals effectively determine the outcome of a General Election and determine the governance of this country. And again if you're a progressive who cares for ensuring that we have a fair society, how can it be right that those who live in safe Labour seats actually are far less cared for by the Labour Party than those who live in those key swing marginals who have the real attention of Gordon Brown or of the Labour high command. If we want a fair society it has to be built on a fair political system. You cannot have social justice based on a fundamentally unjust political system and that's something which we knew as a party in our bones going way back through all of the Reform Acts. And what we need today is a Reform Act that's saying that once and for all this country needs to have a House of Commons which reflects the diversity, the values, the views, the attitudes and the interests of all our people wherever they live and not just a minority in those middle England marginals.

RESPONSE TO AUDIENCE QUESTIONS

Chris Huhne:

If you look at how unbelievably unfair our system is I think it's very important to retain the commitment of the Make Votes Count campaign. Frankly any change would be better than what we've got at the moment and we need to break that lock jam and make sure that we're actually able to improve the system ... any change away from First-Past-the-Post pretty much would be better. We're currently right at one end internationally at the spectrum of disproportionality, with the Israeli system going rather over the top at the other end and then a whole range in between. My personal preference would be for the Irish system. Single transferable votes has been part of this party's gene pool going back to John Stuart Mill. The reason why the Irish actually adopted it in 1921 is precisely of course because they had been allies historically of the Liberal Party and that's where they had learned a system they wanted to have. And the great advantage of the Irish system of the single transferable vote is not only do you get broad proportionality, but you also have the power as a voter to choose the candidate within the party as well as choose the party. So it's a genuinely liberal system that gives much more power to the voter than any other system.

I'm aware of traditional criticism of any move towards electoral reform is somehow making us have the possibility of a less decisive government. If that means under the current system that our legislation is coming out in sixes and sevens and we have three thousand new criminal offences since '97, then a little less decisiveness would probably be an extremely good thing in our government. There is also the old criticism of very proportional systems that you can provide too much power to a hinge party in the middle of politics which was traditionally meant to be our role in the Liberal Democrats to put in one party or another. Under the Irish system that's not true. In fact in Ireland you have had, I believe, seven occasions since 1921 when one party has won an overall majority, because you can get 45% of the vote and then you win an overall majority. But you don't completely distort the opposition in the process and if you get 45% of the votes you get about 51, 52% of the seats in the Doyle. And that seems to me reasonable, because it gives the voters the capacity to actually make a firm and decisive decision when they want to, but it doesn't completely distort the political system. So my personal preference would be for the single transferable vote for those reasons.

Jo Swinson:

Will the Tories ever embrace fairer voting? I'm really not sure. In Scotland it's always kept them alive and the irony is always when they argue First-Past-the-Post again, we do tend to point that out. And I think in Scotland they have come to the conclusion that it's not in their interest to actually argue against it but you still hear them doing it.

It is a major problem that the turn out among young people is so low and in some seats like Cambridge it's been instrumental winning those seats so we know that that vote can be mobilised. One thing I find when I'm the doorsteps speaking to young people is that they often just feel that they don't know enough about it to vote and that they're almost not qualified in some way. So I think making politics very accessible, making sure that information is available – part of that is up to the education system and a part of that is the responsibility that we in politics can try to get across that barrier for young people. The same things that we do for other groups of voters should also work for young people too. Going out, speaking to them, targeting them and I think with the internet campaign we can now offer. I think there are ways of tapping into that voting group making them feel more comfortable with politics so they're more likely to actually use their votes.

Sue Doughty:

A couple of points particularly around this whole business about students, because in Guildford we've got Surrey University and we come up against the same problem. One of the big issues I find is finding them very interested, then they move from house to house end every time they move you've lost them. Quite often they've lost the vote because students don't set up mail forwarding when they move so much, they're off the register in one place, voting in another. No idea that they're entitled to have one vote at general election. They choose where to use it, so you can be registered in two places and use one of those two votes. And this is an educational problem. I don't think it's easy to overcome. It came up at the local elections. We had someone who was passionate about getting the student vote, standing in a ward where there were a lot of student residencies. Promised me something like two thousand student votes and out of that list we got 150 voting. That was quite frightening about how few and this actually working with these people. You can't knock at the doors at halls, you can't get in there, you can't poster them.

Matthew Oakeshott:

There are three things you need to know about the next election. Firstly, the Conservatives will gain from this boundary redistribution that's going on by maybe a dozen seats, maybe as many as 20. Secondly, there's an inbuilt structural benefit in the current electoral system which will give Labour something like a 50 or 60 seat inbuilt majority. That is to say if they both go into the election at 36% Labour will still have a 60 seat majority. And finally, the Conservative Party has got a very fixed view about voting reform. They have a Bill in their inside pockets which is about boundary redistribution that will find some of the big seats where their votes are stacked up being spread out within the rest of the constituency so that can gerrymander the result of the election after the next if they get into power. That is what the Conservatives think is the equivalent of electoral reform. And it is to be watched like a hawk. Thank you very much.