

## Make Votes Count Briefing for party conference season 2007

### 'Prospects for PR': Responding to Brown's plans on constitutional reform

#### Brown's announcements on constitutional reform

In his Manchester speech after the election as the new Labour Party Leader Gordon addressed the issue of constitutional reform "because all the big challenges we face: the environment, raising education standards, building better communities - can only be met by directly involving and engaging the British people in their solution. ..."

"And the principles of my reforms are these: Government giving more power to Parliament; both government and Parliament giving more power to the people; Parliament voting on all the major issues of our time including peace and war; civil liberties safeguarded and enhanced; devolution within a Union of nations: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland - a Union that I believe in and will defend; local government strengthened with new powers - local communities empowered to hold those who make the decisions to account; and with community ownership of assets - greater power for more people to control their lives. ..."

"For people wanting a stronger democracy, we will meet the challenge of change."

This appears to be a perfect basis for urging Mr Brown to pursue the goal of electoral reform. For involving the people in politics they should be allocated the right to express their views in a more proportional electoral system. Proportional representation enables the parliament to speak with many different voices - minorities and oppositions. This would be a "stronger democracy".

So here we have the biggest omission from Brown's plans and thinking. No mention at all - beyond promising to publish the review - of any discussion of voting reform or the way in which the voting system affects the type of politics and political culture we have. And, as the editorials, articles and letters pages in The Guardian and Independent demonstrated, it wasn't just MVC who spotted this. The Constitutional Reform Green Paper laudably stated that "creating a more participatory democracy requires a healthy representative democracy." But there is a big question mark over whether this can be done and whether Parliament can become more accountable, one of the two aims of the constitutional reform route map Gordon Brown announced, without a fairer voting system.

**Make Votes Count** is the coalition that campaigns for a more representative voting system. Our goal is to reform the House of Commons with a voting system that balances the principles of: Broad proportionality, stable government, extending voter choice, and maintaining a constituency link. Make Votes Count supports voting reform in order to achieve a more inclusive, pluralist and empowering political culture.

The introduction of new voting systems for the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, the Greater London Assembly, the Northern Ireland Assembly and for the elections to the European Parliament have led to more representative assemblies and further exposed the failings of the first-past-the-post voting system used in Parliamentary elections.

## Preferential Voting

A surprise omission from Brown's constitutional plans, given that it apparently was discussed at that first Friday Cabinet meeting, was any mention of the Alternative Vote. AV is not proportional and doesn't fulfil the Jenkins Commission criteria for a system that is "broadly proportional". But it has been debated within Labour circles of late: by Brown, Straw, some of the deputy leadership candidates and by MPs like Gareth Thomas and James Plaskitt. The latter two MPs' contribution to the debate can be read on the MVC website.

The recent deputy leadership contest enabled people in the Labour Party to see the benefits of a preferential system and understand better how it worked. There is an argument that at the next general election all voters should be given this same opportunity. We certainly need to welcome all such people campaigning for a change in the voting system, and seek to engage them and try to take them on a process towards proportionality. Hopefully - in the longer term, or in a hung parliament situation - our arguments will win out and the groundwork will have been done to take people on this journey to some form of PR.

## Transfers of power

**Jack Straw** commented on Radio4 in June: "There are sensible ways in which our overall constitutional arrangements can be improved and amended. It may sound like something rather technical and anoraky, but it is fundamentally about what kind of relationship people have in terms of their rights and responsibilities towards each other and the institutions of the state. ... There is a public perception that there is too much power in the hands of the executive. So what we are looking at are ways of rebalancing that."

Then, in his first Commons statement as **Prime Minister**, Gordon Brown proposed a range of changes which will transfer power from his office to the executive.

These powers include to: declare war, request dissolution of Parliament, recall Parliament, ratify treaties, make top public appointments without scrutiny, restrict parliamentary oversight of the intelligence services, choose bishops, help appoint judges, and direct prosecutors in certain criminal cases.

With regard to electoral reform, he restated the Government's determination to create a largely elected upper house, including the removal of hereditary peers. The overdue review of electoral systems is to be published by the end of the year.

The green paper also proposes an assessment of Sunday voting and electronic voting, and an extension of the e-petitioning experiment to apply to Parliament rather than just No 10.

## Speaker's Conference to develop concrete changes

To fulfill his suggestions, the **Prime Minister** recently announced in the Commons that a "citizens' summit, composed of a representative sample of the British people, will be asked to formulate the British statement of values that was proposed in the green paper 'The Governance of Britain'. This has to be a living statement of the British people. It won't take root unless there is a real sense that it has been raised by the people themselves. ..."

Brown went on to announce:

“Instead therefore of dividing along party lines, I propose a Speaker's Conference to unite the parties in search of solutions to the disengagement of the people from the electoral process. ... A Speaker's Conference brings together all the parties at Westminster to look at issues that can only be dealt with on a cross-party basis. In the last century there were five Speakers Conferences. Each looked at different aspects of the electoral process - reform of the franchise, the distribution of parliamentary seats, registration of electors, and other such matters. Today I am proposing to the Speaker that he calls a conference to consider, against the backdrop of a decline in turnout, a number of important issues, such as electoral registration, weekend voting, and the representation of women and ethnic minorities in the House of Commons. ...”

**Dr Ken Ritchie** (Electoral Reform Society) welcomed the Prime Minister's plans. But he insisted that “we must also learn from the past. It is now ninety years since a Speaker's Conference proposed that Parliament be elected using the Single Transferable Vote system. That recommendation, however, was defeated by a mere 7 votes, and thus instead of having a political culture based on reasoned argument and consensus-seeking, we have one based on petty point-scoring and unnecessary confrontation. If the then politicians had put democracy before their vested interests, for much of the past century British politics might have looked very different.”

“Hence the importance of involving citizens in any process aimed at improving democracy. A Speaker's Conference may have a role to play, but it is no substitute for a genuine, wide ranging and transparent public consultation.”

### The forgotten review

The government's much delayed review of the new voting systems it has introduced for elections to the Scottish parliament, Welsh assembly, London assembly and European parliament will shortly be published. The findings seem to have been sat on by politicians for the past 10 months and have also now been leaked to an unsympathetic newspaper (*The Times*) in an attempt to bury the report once and for all.

**Malcolm Clark** (Make Votes Count) states that “if that attempt succeeds, it is the voters of Britain who will be the real losers, denied a discussion of, let alone an actual say in, what they want from politics and what type of electoral system is most appropriate for that.”

“Ironically, the government's past prevarication means the review is out of date even before the final version is printed, with little mention likely of the 2007 set of elections, including Scottish voters' first experience of the single transferable vote. As importantly, the report won't address that most pressing of questions: whether those voting systems that are unchanged - the first-past-the-post elections for English and Welsh local government and for the House of Commons - are still fit for purpose, and, if not, how to reform them.”

“Gordon Brown now needs to ensure that such discussions, in his party and out in the country, are not closed down but rather are integrated into the constitutional route map that he has set out. In one of his first speeches as prime minister, he

called for a "national debate on strengthening our democracy". How he now handles the review's publication, and whether he does indeed open up its findings to some meaningful form of a public dialogue, will be a real test of that commitment."

### Lords reform

Finally, a reminder of where we are on this important issue. MVC's response to the Commons vote earlier this year was that:

"Although the principle of patronage was soundly rejected, we must not allow it to slip in through the backdoor later on in this process. The government's proposed electoral system (partially open lists) could end up being appointment by another name. Parties - rather than the voters - would get most control over the order of candidates on the list. A place at the top of a party's regional list could become a very valuable commodity, an 'honour' that could be bestowed on a preferred individual. That goes against both the end to appointment signalled by the Commons' votes, but also the prevailing mood for reform across the country. The public needs to have faith in whatever system is chosen for elections to the second chamber. We need to have a proper debate, rather than simply having these policies handed down from on high. With legislation unlikely to be imminent, there is still time for the government to start seeking the views and active involvement of the public in deciding what the voting system should be."

The challenge for electoral reformers is not just about the system finally chosen for the second chamber, but also its implications for electing MPs and further reform in general. Would a PR Lords negate the need for a more representative Commons? Would there be any benefit of bringing in AV to the Commons simultaneously to PR for the Lords, as some politicians have mooted?

For further information and briefing materials - including the latest comment from our blog - see the MVC website [www.makemyvotecount.org.uk](http://www.makemyvotecount.org.uk)

Also, for in-depth analysis of May's Scottish Parliamentary and Local, Welsh Assembly and English local election results, see the reports on the ERS website. [www.electoral-reform.org.uk](http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk)

To download a copy of ERS's excellent 'Alternative Review of Electoral Systems' - which explains and analyses all the different voting systems used for UK elections, [www.electoral-reform.org.uk/downloads/experiencesofelectoralsystems.pdf](http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/downloads/experiencesofelectoralsystems.pdf)

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