

Efficient and effective?

Professor Lord (Raymond) Plant of Highfield speaking at the LCER AGM

Raymond Plant became LCER President after he chaired the Plant Commission from 1990 and then became a Peer.

The talismans of New Labour are inclusivity and pluralism and yet these are represented constitutionally in terms only of devolution, not electoral systems. There is a case for constitutionalising the way we represent the many and not the few and therefore electoral reform is not just another policy.

Myth: Strong Government

One argument against electoral reform is that it will lead to a demise in strong government. One of the things we argued in the original Plant Report was that it would be quite wrong to say that strong government is the same as effective government. Effective government is government that is underpinned by a wide degree of consent. Electoral reform would require government to be able to persuade members of parliament, and the electorate more generally, about the likely effects of that policy rather than the macho posturing – the ‘we’ve got our mandate and therefore policies can be implemented irrespective of any qualms or worries’ – which a lot of government consists of. So strong government does not necessarily equate to effective government.

Myth: Soggy Consensus

Another argument is that electoral reform leads to a sort of soggy consensus. It does not seem to me that First Past the Post is very honourable either. The soporific governments of the 1930s were entirely incapable of responding effectively to the problems arising, including Nazism. Neither was FPTP inconsistent with consensual post war Butskellism.

It is also perfectly possible for a more proportional electoral system to produce a major challenge to the consensus, as occurred when the social democrat consensus under Schmidt was replaced by Kohl in West Germany.

Myth: Incapable of dealing with rapid change

Another argument is that PR systems cannot deal with rapid change. But in 1989 Germany was able to cope extremely efficiently with massive disruption of economic, cultural and political life [arising from reunification]; even though it was a coalition government and even though it was voted in by PR.

You can compare that with France today, which has a majoritarian voting system rather than a form of proportionality. So there again there seems to be a historical record which rather undermines the fact that PR or more proportional systems somehow cannot deal with change whereas majoritarian systems can cope quite happily. So I don’t think these things are at all connected with electoral systems.

Myth: Deals behind Closed Doors

It is also argued that all proportional systems lead to deal making behind closed doors.

The fact is that under more proportional systems, it is often known in advance who the coalition parties might be and there is an agreed programme before rather than post election.

Myth: Proliferation of Small Parties

It is alleged that PR leads to the proliferation of small parties but it needs to be said that in 1983 the House of Commons had more parties than any other democratic system in the whole of Europe. Anyone of these parties, given a different outcome after the poll, could have exercised enormous influence.

Indeed the Ulster Unionists were able to wield power before the fall of the Callaghan government in 1979 and did so again during the Major government of 1990 – 1997. So it is not true that FPTP leads to a limitation of parties.

My election

Alex Hilton Speaking at the LCER AGM of his experience of fighting Canterbury for Labour

In Canterbury, a Conservative seat for a century, the result in 2001 was that Labour was 2000 votes behind the Conservatives and the LibDems only had 8000 votes in total. So I had a very clear message that the LibDems couldn’t win there. But every time I said this at any kind of public forum the LibDems would stand up, indignant and irate, and pretend that the LibDems in the neighbouring constituency were not saying the same thing where they were in second place and Labour in third. What I became aware of during this campaign was not so much how our electoral system perverts the results of an election, but it perverts the campaigning as well. And we spend a lot of time not arguing about issues and making clear what our differences are with the LibDems, instead just trying to talk our way around the little vagaries and the loopholes and the tactical voting.

That Pym moment

Clare Short on why the 2005 Election gave us the chance to renew Labour's interest in electoral reform

On election night whilst we were milling around at the count waiting for the first Birmingham results, I was asked by an interviewer about the likely results. I found myself saying that big majorities were bad for governments. We all knew Labour would lose seats and it seemed best to make a virtue of this. I later remembered that Mrs Thatcher had dropped Francis (now Lord) Pym from her Cabinet for saying the same thing, but it was too late to apply that sanction to me. It was clear throughout the campaign that the voters, and perhaps especially traditional Labour supporters did not want a Tory government, but wanted to chastise Tony Blair and were therefore determined to reduce Labour's majority. Many lifelong Labour supporters made it clear that they were voting Liberal Democrat to protest against the Iraq war and would not consider voting Labour until Blair had gone. The swing from Labour to the Liberal Democrats was also very high in seats with a large Bangladeshi and Pakistani population. I think it would be unwise for Labour to assume that all these votes will come back in 2009.

What the election demonstrated was that the First Past the Post system is a very blunt instrument. MPs in the marginals pay the price for government unpopularity whatever their record. And there is a danger that MPs in the safe seats tend to defend the status quo. It is notable that the three former chairs of the Labour Campaign for Elector Reform lost their seats. That process of losing the 1997 majority, which stalled in 2001, when Labour lost votes but not seats, is likely to continue. It is highly likely that Labour will continue to lose seats in local government and may well lose its majority in 2009. The prospects for a hung parliament in 2009 must be significant. This could well lead to a Labour/Liberal

Democrat coalition and agreement to change the voting system. It would of course be more elegant if Labour stood by its 1997 manifesto commitment to a referendum on electoral reform, rather than have it forced upon it by another round of poor election results. But despite a big growth of support for electoral reform after an election that gave Labour a 67 seat majority with the support of only 35.2 per cent of the electorate, there is as yet little sign of such a move amongst Labour's leadership. This could turn out to be Gordon Brown's tragedy with a late handover from Blair leading to defeat in 2009.

Immediately after the election, the press reported that the electorate had given Blair a bloody nose and the spin from No 10 was of humility and listening. But the arrogance of the big majority soon reasserted itself and it seems to be forgotten that we now have 105 Labour MPs with majorities lower than 5,000. Only 15 of these have Lib Dems in second place, however 43 Labour MPs have smaller majorities over the Lib Dems than Anne Campbell's 8,579 in 2001. Clearly, Labour's majority is no longer unassailable.

We need to face the fact that we have a Labour government with less percentage support than any government since the Great Reform Act in 1832 and Labour's 9.5 million votes is our lowest post war vote, second only to 1983. The shocking reality is that of all those registered to vote, out of ten, four did not vote, four voted for other parties and two voted Labour. Labour's majority is a gross exaggeration of its support at the ballot box and it is impossible for Labour to seriously claim that it has a mandate from the electorate. The continuing rise of the third Party is creating an even greater distortion than is normal in British elections and causing a growing disgruntlement amongst the electorate.

It was very noticeable towards

the end of the campaign that there was a panic at the top and Tony Blair ceased to appear unless accompanied by Gordon Brown. The Labour campaign then went to great lengths to claim – misleadingly – that a vote for the Liberal Democrats would result in a Tory government. As Labour under Blair has moved steadily rightwards, it bangs the anti-Tory drum louder and louder to try to keep the Labour vote in line. But increasingly this will not work. Until recently most contests in constituencies were between Labour and the Conservatives. Not any longer. Labour is in third place in over 120 seats and voters have got used to tactical voting.

We talk a lot about good governance and make it a condition of writing off debt and making investment when it comes to international development. But Chris Patten recently said on 'Any Questions?' that if any of his EU monitoring missions had been asked to observe a system like the UK's which is so unrepresentative of the people's vote and biased to the executive, it would not be given a clean bill of health. Interestingly Neil Kinnock made clear his support for electoral reform in the same programme.

In 1997 we made the offer of a referendum to let the people decide. We all know our democracy is flawed, our government lacks legitimacy, parties target individuals who can make the difference between winning and losing in the few key marginals and Labour moves ever more sharply to the right to hold on to the votes of middle England. And increasingly voters are disengaged from politics and the Labour Party is crumbling across the country. Electoral reform would entrench progressive politics for years ahead, reinstate the authority of parliament and respect for public opinion and create the conditions for rebuilding the Labour Party. The question is whether we have to wait to learn the hard way.

**Clare Short MP
for
Birmingham
Ladywood**