

Why PR?

Anne Campbell makes the case

The 2005 result

The results of the 2005 general election were – in democratic terms – blatantly unfair, as Labour formed a majority government with only 35 per cent of the votes cast, about 22 per cent of the electorate. The Conservatives gained more votes than Labour in England, and the legitimacy of a Labour government is being questioned by many ordinary people.

This is an argument which should be persuasive to Party leaders who seek to reengage people in the political process. Certainly it ought to lead to a more humble approach to policy and legislation, winning the arguments rather than relying solely on winning the votes in parliament. But I recognise the difficulty in persuading governments to question publicly their own legitimacy. So the question I am addressing here is whether change would now be in Labour's self interest.

Progressive Government

In 1997, we in the Labour movement had hopes of building a progressive left-wing consensus that would keep the Conservatives out of power for decades. The 1997 manifesto had a commitment to a referendum on the voting system for electing MPs to the Commons along with other constitutional changes contained in the Cook-Maclennan agreement. Soon after the election, the Prime Minister set up the Jenkins Commission.

But the phenomenal success in the 1997 election ensured that Labour settled down to 8 years of 'strong government'. With a change of LibDem leadership, and many Labour MPs having fought bitter battles against them, that understanding with the LibDems has disintegrated. However, the original aspiration must hold true. It would be devastating and disastrous for Labour to have achieved so much and still lose power to the Tories in 2009.

Astonishing Arithmetic

Labour clung to power in 2005 mainly because of a favourable distribution of Labour voters and a divided opposition. In 2005, Conservatives gained only 0.4 per cent of the vote over their result in 2001. Labour lost 5.4 per cent, mainly to the LibDems but also to protest parties. Seats were gained by the Conservatives because of the breakdown of the previous tactical voting strategy. As long ago as 1992, and certainly in 1997 and 2001, many LibDem and Labour voters voted for the Party most likely to keep the Conservatives out of office. In 2005, some voters were more concerned to give the government a 'bloody nose' over the intelligence failure in Iraq. There are signs that Labour is losing out to the party of protest as the Conservatives did in the 1990s. On the whole the election achieved what many people appeared to want. This was a Labour Government with a reduced majority. Many people who voted against Labour were counting on the fact that others would vote for Labour thus ensuring a Labour government. In view of the unpredictability of elections, this was an astonishing result.

The Future?

After 12 years in power, the protest vote is likely to increase rather than diminish. Even if Iraq ceases to become an issue and there is a 'Brown bounce', Labour is vulnerable to the LibDems and the Tories in 41 marginal seats, defined as those with a majority of less than 5 per cent over the nearest rival. These consist of 5 seats with LibDems in second place and 36 with Conservative in second place. Boundary changes already recommended and likely to be approved in the autumn will also mean that Labour will lose seats if the trend continues. There is also a chance that we would end up fighting LibDems, who fight targeted seats like by-elections, building on local government suc-

cesses in urban areas. There are 43 seats where the Labour majority over LibDem is smaller than my own majority in Cambridge in 2001. It seems likely that a small increase in Conservative votes and a further large increase in LibDem votes will lead to Labour losing its majority after 2009. So the question should be 'how can we ensure that there is a progressive left-wing Government after the next election?'

Under PR?

Currently, many Labour voters in safe seats find themselves bypassed by the General Election and turnout is reduced. In the many Tory-LibDem and LibDem-Tory seats, Labour voters find themselves tactically voting which further reduces the aggregate Labour vote. When New Zealand changed to PR, it was their Labour heartlands which benefited because every vote began to count. No one is advocating a pure PR system for the UK Parliamentary elections, but even if May's election had been fought under one, we would have formed a Government by entering into a coalition with the SDLP and LibDems. The Labour-LibDem coalition seems to work reasonably well in Scotland, and that is on a much more proportional system than envisaged for Westminster.

The FPTP system favours parties which have the majority of first votes and the seats gained over-represents their support. This works for us now in the North West where 28 Labour MPs were elected, one Conservative and one LibDem. This may not continue. Under a pure regional PR system there would have been 16 Labour, six Conservative, seven LibDems and one other. In the East of England there are 13 Labour, 40 Conservative and three LibDems. Under PR it would have been 17 Labour, 24 Conservative, 12 LibDems and three others. Any element of PR would ensure that great swathes of the South and East of England, with thousands of Labour voters, would get some Labour representation. The distribution of MPs within a Party would be better between the regions, giving opportunities to Southern MPs outside London to enter the Cabinet, which is unusually monopolised by Scots, Welsh, Northern and Inner London MPs from safe seats who

cannot be blamed for not seeing the problem.

Conservative Government or Coalition?

Of course it is possible that the current FPTP system would itself produce a hung Parliament in 2009. If this were the case then we would have to do a deal with the LibDems and possibly other minority Parties to form a Government. One of the demands of a minority Party in return for support would probably be for some form of PR.

The danger is that the next election produces a majority Conservative Government or a result that would clearly undermine Labour's legitimacy, such as the Tories getting a higher percentage vote than Labour. This is currently true in England, and raises the West Lothian question in terms of all health and education policy currently devolved to Scotland and Wales. Both results would set back not only the many progressive reforms which Labour has made, but the Conservatives would either win a subsequent election under FPTP or do everything possible to avoid a Labour or Liberal Democrat Government in future.

The Way Forward

A referendum in this Parliament with the prospect of introducing the necessary boundary changes and legislation in the next Parliament would gain Labour much support. It would appear that Labour was listening and willing to work together with other parties for a more pluralist democracy. It would also be difficult for the Conservatives to ignore the results of a referendum that had already happened, even if they were in power after 2009.

I would argue that the best chance of a continuing Labour, or left-wing, progressive government is by carrying out the manifesto commitment that we made in 1997 and ensuring that the question of electoral reform is fairly put to the electorate. There is also the question of trust and keeping one's promises which is generally liked by voters and appreciated particularly by the tactical voters we need in Labour-Conservative marginals.

Anne Campbell (MP for Cambridge 1992 – 2005, Chair of Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform 2004 -)

Principle and practice in progressive politics

John Denham MP speaking at the LCER AGM

I should reassure those of a sensitive nature that I do believe that electoral reform is right in principle. It's just that the reason that we have the opportunity to make progress, over the next two years, is because what is right in principle happens to coincide more closely to what is right in practice, for people on the left, in progressive politics, than at any time in the last thirty years. In reality the way that we will convince the Labour Party of the desirability of electoral reform is probably going to be far less about the principle than convincing them of the practice.

The last election results have intensified the trend in the last few years for people who are broadly progressive, ourselves and the Liberal Democrats, to fight each other with ever greater intensity in more and more parts of the country. In many of the local elections next year the major battle will be between Labour and Liberal Democrats in Labour held urban areas. The same is going to be true in many parliamentary constituencies. The consequences of that are to increase quite sharply the possibility of the Tories coming through without any great increase in their support. In the South East region we have nine seats with majorities of less than a thousand. In most of those seats, the Tories made precious little headway. What nearly gave all those seats to the Tories was the swing to the Liberal Democrats.

Now the logic of the First Past the Post system, and it is absolutely inescapable logic, is that we will fight the Liberal Democrats harder than we ever have done before and they will fight us harder than they ever have done before. It is almost an inescapable consequence of the electoral system that we have at the moment that that is what will happen over the next three or four years. You can't escape, with the First Past the Post system, the logic of where you are and whom you have to fight and how you have to fight in order to win votes. Otherwise you are just committing political suicide for no good reason. You don't have a choice. But the more you do that, the more likely it is that the Tories, despite all their current troubles, will get a disproportionate success in the next general election. What is a broadly progressive majority, about 60 per cent of people, will no longer be represented in future government.

The second consequence, is that the First Past the Post system is now directly affecting what it would be possible to imagine a progressive government doing. Most of our resources in the last election, of all the parties, were focused, not yet scientifically on 30,000 people who actually turned out to matter, but on the quarter of a million people we vaguely thought could matter. What that means is that the politics, not just of our own party but all the parties, is defined by the politics of those quarter of a million people.

Now the old argument against PR is that you can't allow seven per cent of the electorate to determine the politics of the government. We are now in a situation where we allow about a quarter of a million people, out of the entire electorate, to determine the politics of the government. Because what the political parties offer, and can't avoid offering, is what those quarter of a million people want. And this is actually diminishing the scope of progressive politics.

I will give you a good example. We were very comradely in the run up to the general election. At Prime Minister's Question Time, time and time again, Tony Blair explained to Charles Kennedy that a local income tax was a bad idea. Out there the Liberal Democrats said no: it's good, it's progressive, it's radical. What happened in the election? After they lost Guildford, after they lost Newbury, after they nearly lost Romsey, after they nearly lost Eastleigh, the Liberal Democrats shot back to Westminster saying we're not going to mess around with radical policies that sound leftwing anymore. It becomes impossible to have radical politics if you're going to allow your electoral system to be determined by a quarter of a million people whose views count. So it's not just that, as Jon Cruddas has argued and Robin argued earlier, that we don't really campaign in areas that are seen as safe Labour. We actually end up with a policy platform that cannot be defined by the needs of people in safe Labour areas and indeed the other parties don't have much choice about it either. So if we want the prospect of progressive politics, we have to break out of the shackles that the system is now putting on: what we can offer, what we can campaign on and how we win. This electoral system is actually pushing all of us to try and intensify our arguments with the people we are closest to in politics, to the great advantage of the people with whom we have most difference.

John Denham is the MP for Southampton Itchen (1992 - and joint Chair of Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform since July 2005

Getting the system right

Ken Ritchie assesses the options for reform

The 2005 general election was further proof, if we needed it, that our first-past-the-post voting system does not work. The Electoral Reform Society's first report on the election was entitled 'Worst Election Ever'. If you have any doubt over the accuracy of that assessment, contact the Society and we will be happy to send you a copy of our report. The principal task now facing electoral reformers is to secure recognition of the failings of our electoral system because there is not going to be change until there is acceptance of the need for change.

The question of what particular change is needed, however, cannot be ignored. The Government has started, albeit in a rather half-hearted way, its promised review of the experience of electoral systems. It is inevitable that the review will conclude that new systems introduced since 1997 have not delivered all the benefits often predicted by reformers. It is clear that a move towards 'PR' in itself is not sufficient to overcome the present problems of unrepresentative outcomes and voter disengagement. We need to be prepared to state what characteristics a new system should have. Here the four criteria the Government gave to the Jenkins Commission in 1997 provide a good starting point:

Broad proportionality

Greater proportionality is important because we want elections, which are fairer, both to parties and to voters, in the way they convert support into seats. Moreover, proportionality helps to make votes count: with PR, even in a strong Conservative area, a Labour vote has a chance of contributing to the election of a Labour member. We do not, however, need pure proportionality. Most alternative systems would allow a party with less than half of the votes to gain an outright majority (claims that electoral reform would lead to perpetual coalition politics are unfounded), but broad proportionality would not award excessive majorities to parties that do not merit them.

Voter choice

We want a system that allows voters to choose whom they want to represent them - closed list systems such as that used for the European elections only allow voters to choose between the parties.

Transferable voting, which allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference, is one way of increasing voter choice. Voters can vote for candidates who might have little chance of success, but these votes are not wasted as they can transfer to second or subsequent preferences. Transferable votes also obviate most forms of tactical voting - Labour voters in a Conservative-Liberal Democrat marginal can safely vote Labour but still express a preference between the two main contenders.

Some systems require parties to field more than one candidate in a multi-member constituency. This can also increase choice by allowing, for example, a Labour voter to choose between alternative Labour candidates - some might make their choice on the basis of gender, while others might make it on the basis of candidates' positions on particular issues.

All proportional systems increase voter choice in the sense that they require a number of candidates to be elected in an electoral region. An elector who wants to raise an issue with an MP can choose which local MP is most likely to be sympathetic to their concerns.

Accountability to the electorate in a geographic area

We want a system that ensures a strong link between members and their electorates. With closed list systems, members will owe their election to where their parties placed them on their lists - those at the top may be almost guaranteed election while those at the bottom may have no realistic chance. There is then a danger that members will feel more accountable to their party selectorates than to the electorate. However, a strong constituency link does not require single member constituencies, as many options

of reform (and some supporters) maintain. Provided that multi-member constituencies are not unduly large, links can be just as strong as in single-member constituencies. Indeed they can be stronger: an elector represented by several members is more likely to have one whom they helped elect or of similar political views and will feel a stronger link with that member than, say, a Labour elector with a Conservative MP.

Promotion of stable government

There is no evidence to suggest that any sensible reform would make government unstable - there are stable democracies around the world that have been using proportional systems for decades. And whatever other criticisms one might make of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, they cannot be accused of being unstable.

Choice of system

If we start with these criteria it becomes clear that a closed list will not meet our needs. So what are the main alternatives?

The **Alternative Vote** is not an option. It increases voter choice but it is no more proportional than the current first-past-the-post and could lead to even more distorted outcomes.

Additional Member Systems have some attractions - they produce more representative institutions which no parties can dominate without strong popular support, and smaller parties have a chance of gaining a voice. However, the constituency contests are first-past-the-post elections with the defects of our current voting system, and the list contests suffer from the defects of closed lists. That AMS creates two categories of representatives - constituency and list members - has also produced conflict in Scotland and Wales.

AMS could be improved by using transferable voting in the constituencies and open lists (in which voters rather than parties determine who is elected) for the

A guide to Electoral Systems

First-past-the-post (FPTP) - The popular name for the way we elect our MPs and local councillors. Whoever gets most votes in each constituency wins, even if that is far from an overall majority.

additional members. With these changes, AMS become the **Alternative Vote Plus (AV+)** as recommended by the Jenkins Commission. Voter choice is greatly increased, but while constituency members have obvious links to the electorate, the same cannot be said of the list members.

A fully open list, in which voters choose not just a party list but a particular candidate on it, would overcome many of the problems of closed lists and does not lead to different categories of members. But rather than changing to open lists, there is a much stronger case for moving to the **Single Transferable Vote** that uses transferable voting and ensures that most voters contribute in some way to the election of a representative. Moreover, the characteristics of STV, its proponents argue, make it the system most likely to encourage a less negative and more consensual form of politics.

However, while reformers may take different views of the merits and pitfalls of the different options for change, the systems debate will be irrelevant if we do not succeed in winning the argument that first-past-the-post must go. There will be a time and a place for detailed technical discussions of alternative systems, but for the moment we must focus on what is wrong with the present system and on the nature of the democracy we want to achieve.

**Ken Ritchie, Chief Executive,
Electoral Reform Society**

List systems - We elect our MEPs using a 'closed' list system. Each party fields an ordered list of candidates in each electoral region. A formula (the D'Hondt method for European elections) is used to convert parties' shares of the votes into seats. If a party wins, say, 3 seats - the top three candidates on its list are elected. List systems can also be 'open'. Voters then vote for particular candidates on lists and if a party has enough support to win, say, 3 seats - it is the three candidates of that party with most personal votes who are elected. List systems are used in most European countries.

Alternative Vote (AV) - Like FPTP this system uses single-member constituencies, but instead of voting with an 'X', voters rank candidates in order of preference. If no candidate has more than 50 per cent of the votes, the candidate with fewest votes is eliminated and those votes transferred to the voters' second preferences. The process continues until someone has an outright majority. Used in Australian Lower House elections and internal Labour Party elections, often in the form of eliminating ballot. Not a form of proportional representation.

Supplementary Vote (SV) - Like AV this system uses single-member constituencies, but instead of showing a preference between first and second choice by 1 and 2, the voter places two "X's" in two boxes side by side on the ballot paper. Used to elect the London Mayor.

Additional Member System (AMS) - Voters have two votes - one to elect a constituency member in a FPTP election and the other for a party. Parties nominate lists of candidates (generally in regions) and 'additional' or 'top-up' seats are awarded to candidates on these lists to compensate for the disproportionality of the FPTP election. It is the system of post-war Germany, and is now used for the Scottish Parliament, the Assembly for Wales and the London Assembly as well as in New Zealand and other countries.

Alternative Vote Plus (AV+) - A variant of AMS devised by the Jenkins Commission set up by the Labour Government in 1997. AV would be used instead of FPTP in the constituency contests, and the party lists would be 'semi-open', giving voters additional choice.

Single Transferable Vote (STV) - Voters vote by ranking candidates in order of preference, as with AV, but in contrast to AV, STV uses multi-member constituencies and can therefore produce proportional results. In the count, as well as transferring votes from eliminated candidates, votes are transferred from candidates with more votes than they need to secure election. This results in most voters contributing to the outcome. STV is used in the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland (except for Westminster elections), Malta and for the Senate elections in Australia. It will be used for Scottish local elections from 2007, is being considered for the Scottish Parliament, and was recommended by the Richard Commission for the Welsh Assembly and by the Sutherland Commission for local elections in Wales.

Democracy nil point

My experience as Labour parliamentary candidate for Sutton and Cheam in the 2005 general election showed me conclusively that we must change the electoral system if we ever wish to see British politics rejuvenated. Instead of talking to voters in Sutton about the merits of competing policies and political philosophies, I seemed to spend most of my time either reassuring anxious Labour supporters that they could happily vote for their preferred candidate, in third place behind the Lib Dems and Tories, without letting in the Tories by the back door. Or I had to convince them that it was worthwhile voting Labour at all, given that we had little or no chance of winning. Elections should enable voters to exercise positive choice. They need to be able to vote for their preferred candidates without worrying that, as with first past the post, their choice has the perverse consequence of allowing their least preferred candidate to win by default. And every vote cast in an election must count equally, whether from Labour voters in Surrey or Tory voters in South Wales. Elections should not be determined by the priorities of floating voters in marginal constituencies. With the current system, Labour activists and voters in unwinnable seats become disillusioned. What's the point? Local Labour parties run the risk of becoming moribund. And once lost, support can take years to recover. That is, if it ever does at all.

Anand Shukla 2005 Labour Parliamentary Candidate Sutton and Cheam