

ActionPlan

The briefing for Make Votes Count campaigners
Issue 25 Winter 2005



Building the Groundswell for Reform

Research shows that as people become more aware about voting reform, the more likely they are to support it. On that measure, we've done well this year. The period of increased media interest and public debate on the issue immediately after the General Election was a real boost to the campaign. But this upsurge was not solely based on gut reaction to the democratic deficiencies of the result. It has much to do with the contributions and determination of electoral reform campaigners, both before and after the election. Whether you asked your candidates about their position on PR at a hustings; distributed Make My Vote Count materials; logged onto our website; organised a street stall; wrote a letter to your local newspaper; or signed up to *The Independent's* 'Campaign for Democracy': a big thank you.

The challenge now for Make Votes Count is to build up "a groundswell for reform" – to show sustained popular support for voting reform and to push the issue up the political agenda. There are three new ways you can get involved:

1) join the groundswell

Encourage others to sign up (most easily done online), to show their support for the campaign. 'Groundswell' supporters will be kept up-to-date with occasional short email alerts and news, and invited to come together with other campaigners locally where appropriate.

2) become an advocate

This is your opportunity to use your initiative: to do whatever you want, whenever you want, to support the campaign. Make Votes Count will provide a range of support for advocates, including a special website and a pack with briefing materials, campaign aids and action ideas.

3) local action

Are you willing to be in a contact point for MVC in your locality and to lobby your local MP? We are looking to recruit more 'constituency e-contacts' to strengthen our lobbying of elected representatives.

For more information about these initiatives and how you can get involved, see our campaign site

www.makemyvotecount.org.uk

Email Bulletins: If you are not already receiving our email updates, please supply us with your current email address so we can add you to the list. Alternatively, you can fill out the 'join the groundswell' form online.

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ActionPlan is produced by Make Votes Count in association with the Electoral Reform Society



Electoral Reform Society

Make Votes Count Partner Organisations

Charter 88

0845 450 7210
info@charter88.org.uk
www.charter88.org.uk

Christian Socialist Movement

020 7233 3736
admin@thecsm.org.uk
www.christiansocialist.org.uk

Conservative Action for Electoral Reform (CAER)

0207 981 9887
info@caer.uk.com
www.caer.uk.com

Electoral Reform Society (ERS)

020 7928 1622
ers@reform.demon.co.uk
www.electoral-reform.org.uk

Fawcett Society

020 7253 2598
info@fawcettsociety.org.uk
www.fawcettsociety.org.uk

Green Party

020 7272 4474
office@greenparty.org.uk
www.greenparty.org.uk

Liberal Democrats

020 7222 7999
info@libdems.org.uk
www.libdems.org.uk

Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform (LCER)

c/o 020 7928 2076
lcerinfo@yahoo.co.uk
www.electoralreform.org.uk

New Politics Network

020 7278 4443
info@new-politics.net
www.new-politics.net

Plaid Cymru

029 2064 6000
post@plaidcymru.org
www.plaidcymru.org

X-Change

020 7928 1622
x-change@reform.demon.co.uk
www.x-change.org.uk

www.makevotescount.org.uk

Remembering Robin Cook, MVC President

By David Lipsey, Chair of Make Votes Count

"Electoral reformers are used to setbacks; but the blow of Robin Cook's premature death is a hard one indeed. As our President, Robin was both an inspiration to our cause and a tireless worker for it. Much has been written in the press about his powers of oratory but not so much about how he applied them for us. Suffice it to say that, when you listened to Robin, you marvelled that anyone could be so blind, stupid and self-interested as to support the present electoral system. His was a technique little seen in modern politics: humour used to deadly effect. In my last conversation with him about the subject he said that, though we had not yet won the war, we had won the argument. I was tempted to reply that *he* had won the argument."

"Year after year he filled the hall for our fringe meetings at Labour Party conference, which were frequently the largest of the week. But he was not one simply to turn out on the big occasions. He was always available for advice, was willing to attend management committee meetings at crucial junctures, and - more unusually in a politician of his seniority - never stopped lobbying his colleagues on our behalf. He added weight to our cause."

"It said in some obituaries that he was more respected in parliament than liked. I am not sure that was true in general, particularly in his later years as Gaynor softened the rough edges, but it was certainly not true of me. I respected him and I liked him and I shall miss him. As will the electoral reform movement, but we shall do as he would have wished: push on, in the firm conviction that we shall get there in the end."

You can read further tributes to Robin Cook from members of the MVC Management Committee and MVC supporters on the news section of our website. You can also add your own tributes there if you wish.

New Partners

This autumn we have welcomed two new members to the MVC coalition. X-Change is the newly formed youth and student wing of ERS. CAER is the re-activated Conservative Action for Electoral Reform. Good luck to both.

Fundraising

We are dependent as ever on your generosity. Thank you to everyone who responded so positively to our post-election fundraising drive. But the campaign continues. With greater funds we can become more pro-active in our lobbying and outreach work. We now have the technology to accept credit card donations over the phone. Online donations (using paypal) can be made via our website. Or you can arrange a transfer or standing order directly into the Make Votes Count bank account, number 69097782 sort code 08-92-99. Very many thanks.

Staff Changes

Nina Temple stepped down as MVC Director at the end of August. She has worked tirelessly and passionately for the organisation for five years and has been a great asset to the electoral reform movement. We wish her success with her new job, as Head of Development and Communications at think-tank Social Market Foundation.

Malcolm Clark started in the new post of MVC Co-ordinator in July and works in the office four days a week. He has been a volunteer at MVC since 2004, combining that with his role as Administrative Co-ordinator for Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform. Prior to completing a Masters in British Politics, he worked for three years for the company behind Divine Fairtrade chocolate. So from fair trade to fair votes ...

MVC at the Fringe

Conference season 2005 was a busy and productive period for MVC. We kicked off with a fringe meeting at the TUC. Jon Cruddas MP, who is becoming a powerful voice challenging unthinking commitment to FPTP, spoke about how the formation of policy on the basis of the preferences and prejudices of key swing voters in marginal seats is to the detriment of Labour's traditional values and heartland communities. Then it was on to Blackpool, with over one hundred Lib Dems cramming into a room on the first day of their conference to hear from a very accomplished and youthful panel of MPs – Nick Clegg, Ed Davey, Mark Oaten and Jo Swinson – on building the groundswell for reform.

At Labour we again had a 100-plus audience taking part in lively discussions; with Neil Kinnock, Fiona Mactaggart MP, John Denham MP and Polly Toynbee (below) speaking passionately on how the voting system threatens Labour. Both the rally and the annual reformers' reception attracted groups of sixth-formers from local colleges. What was most striking about the week in Brighton was that electoral reform, together with associated issues around re-engaging with the electorate, was a hot topic on the fringe - not just from the audience but from many panellists too.



Back in Blackpool, we got a much better reception from the Conservatives than we had expected. A reception hosted by Jonathan Evans MEP attracted fifty-plus people and led to an impromptu and intelligent Q&A session. The Conservative Action for Electoral Reform meeting, with former MPs Michael Brown and Keith Best, further contributed to the debate and provided another chance to flyer delegates.

Electoral Choice Bill

In collaboration with Charter88, David Chaytor MP launched the Electoral Choice Bill on 15 Nov. He will introduce it to the Commons as a Ten Minute Rule Bill next year. If made law, it would make provision for referendums to be held on changing the electoral system, at both a national and local level.

Trade Unions

MVC attended the Tolpuddle Martyrs' Festival and ran a stand. This was the first time we've done this and our presence was noted and discussed amongst trade unionists there.

Government Review

Back in July, David Lipsey wrote an open letter to Lord Falconer on the government's promised review of electoral systems. He called for an opening up of the review process to include public consultation, the widening of its remit to encompass the Jenkins Commission's recommendations on the election of MPs, and the drawing up of a timetable for a referendum. We finally received the reply in late September. Lord Falconer's response shed no new light on proceedings. He wrote that:

"the internal review [is] currently underway within the Department for Constitutional Affairs ... [it is] a desk-based review conducted by officials ... once the internal review has concluded it will report back to the Cabinet Sub-Committee on Electoral Policy, where decisions regarding any next steps will be taken .. this government remains committed to engaging with the wider public on this issue and maintains that a referendum remains the right way to agree any change for parliamentary elections to Westminster."

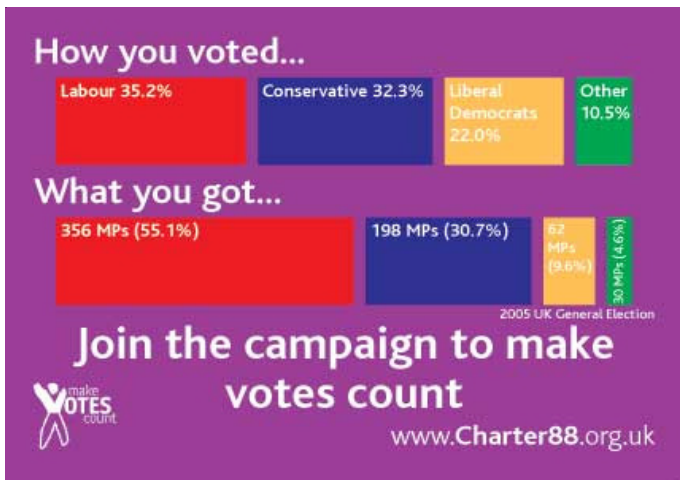
German Elections

The very close election result in Germany in September was followed by protracted discussions on forming a government. Some First-Past-the-Post advocates aggressively seized on this as an example of why PR is flawed. In keeping with Robin Cook's dictum of "people who are interested in electoral reform tend to be nice people ... we don't do nasty well", we responded with a thoughtful article by David Lipsey (available from the MVC website) and Lewis Baston conducted a detailed and reasoned study of the result and the workings of the German electoral system (available from the ERS website). Lewis argues that "those who criticise the outcome of the German election are in effect criticising the choice of the German electorate". And, as history tells us, FPTP does not make us immune from experiencing problems forming a stable government after a very close election result. A parliamentary seminar on this theme is planned for December.

Promoting the campaign

Make Votes Count has a range of new, post-election, resources to help you promote the campaign.

Postcards



These colourful and effective 'supporter recruitment' postcards, successfully trialled by Charter88 and the MVC group in NW England, are now available from the office. The postcards make the case for reform in a straightforward and eye-catching way, and are great for handing out on stalls or distributing at meetings, in mailings, or to anyone you strike up a conversation with about politics and making votes count. Please encourage people to tick the box at the back of the postcard, so we can continue to send them MVC updates.

Video on voting reform

MVC worked with the Lib Dems on a three minute film 'short' on voting reform, aired on Channel 4's *Political Slot* on 27 July. It was a cross-party effort with politicians from the three main parties (Nick Clegg, Austin Mitchell and Lord Renton) interviewed for it. It has now been transferred to Windows Media Player format and is available to download from the website, can be emailed to people, and can be used by supporters and teachers for presentations or talks. For copies on CD, contact the MVC office.

Make My Vote Count materials

A range of 'make my vote count' publicity material is still available, and can be ordered online or from the MVC office. We have A3 and A4 posters for windows, noticeboards, meetings and street stalls; A5 post-election leaflets, little calling cards, and this year's essential campaigning wristband. There is no charge for these materials, but donations (particularly to cover postage) would be much appreciated.

Make My Vote Count website www.makemyvotecount.org.uk

The website was re-launched to aid navigation and to reflect the post-election situation. It continues to be the main focus for the public campaign. New features include the ability to sign up online to receive email updates, a dedicated campaign news section and archive and a revamped message boards facility. The website also hosts a blog, updated daily by our resident blogger Paul Davies to highlight the ongoing and dynamic nature of the campaign.

Briefing Materials

General Election 2005 Report & Analysis

ERS has published a comprehensive analysis of the General Election result. A summary of their findings has been included as a separate pamphlet within this mailing; although Labour MVC supporters will receive the Chartist supplement instead. The full report can be downloaded from the ERS website.

ERS also launched a report on 'The Conservatives and the electoral system'. The report draws out the relevant election statistic and then goes into some detail about boundaries and bias and other Conservative arguments for electoral reform. Copies of all ERS reports and briefing documents are available online at www.electoral-reform.org.uk

'Robin Cook's lasting legacy' - an LCER/Chartist supplement on voting reform

Robin Cook gave his last speech on electoral reform at the LCER AGM, on 5 July. Robin's speech and responses to audience questions, together with contributions from John Denham MP and Raymond Plant, were reproduced in a supplement to the bi-monthly *Chartist* magazine. Articles by Anne Campbell, Clare Short and others outline the Labour arguments for reform and why it is in the party's interest.

LCER members and Labour supporters of MVC should receive a copy of the supplement with this mailing. If you would like a copy, you can request one (whilst stocks last) by emailing lcerinfo@yahoo.co.uk. Alternatively, the supplement is available to view and download as a pdf from the MVC and LCER websites.

Contact the Make Votes Count office:

6 Chancel Street, London SE1 0UU

tel: 020 7928 2076

info@makevotescount.org.uk

www.makemyvotecount.org.uk