

Campaign for Democracy: Labour 'can stay in Government by backing PR'

By Andrew Grice, Political Editor

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Labour will have a better chance of retaining power if it abandons the first-past-the-post system and embraces electoral reform, a senior Labour MP has said.

John Denham, chairman of the Commons Home Affairs Select Committee, made his remarks as Labour supporters of proportional representation (PR) agreed to relaunch their campaign to win a change to the voting system. At its annual meeting, some members of the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform expressed concern that the momentum for change had been lost since *The Independent's* Campaign for Democracy put the issue on the political agenda, after Labour won a majority of 67 with just 35 per cent of the vote last year.

They agreed to launch a drive to ensure a debate on PR, as Labour seeks to "renew" itself in office and develops a new agenda to follow the expected change of leadership from Tony Blair to Gordon Brown. Although Mr Blair lost interest in voting reform after winning a huge majority in 1997, Mr Brown is considering a number of constitutional reforms, and campaigners will now urge him to include PR. With Labour facing financial problems in the wake of the cash for honours affair, some of its MPs fear the party will channel its limited resources into a smaller number of target seats at the next election.

Mr Denham told the group's meeting that the coalition New Labour forged in 1997 was "under threat" because the party was losing support in its heartland seats and in Middle England which had been wooed by Mr Blair.

The former Home Office minister said: "We want to revive our appeal to all those who have backed Labour in the past 10 years in the heartlands and Labour's new territories. But first-past-the-post forces political parties to focus on a narrow group of voters who hold the key to a small number of key marginals - perhaps 30,000 voters nationally - in the much-vaunted centre ground. "Only a reformed voting system, one that forces political parties to work for every vote, will provide the political stimulus we need to rebuild our struggling coalition.

"A reformed voting system would bring its own problems. But Britain has a built-in centre-left majority of voters on most issues. And changing the voting system is the best way of expressing that majority, of cementing a progressive consensus, and of ensuring that Labour renews its appeal to a broad coalition of voters."

Warning that Labour could lose its overall majority with a swing of only one per cent to the Tories, Mr Denham said Labour's fate was as likely to be determined by people switching between Liberal Democrats and Tories as by any appeal of its own.

"Of course, we can win again under first-past-the-post, as we have before. But there is likely to be a political cost. Labour can win another majority under the present voting system; but at a cost to some of our radical aspirations. "Time is running out for Labour to recognise the importance of voting reform to progressive politics in Britain," Mr Denham said.

"First-past-the-post is undermining the progressive consensus that New Labour created in the 1990s, and threatening the ability to deliver progressive politics in Britain. "The hallmark of New Labour was the vision of a society that could meet both the aspirations of successful Britain and tackle the poverty and exclusion of the most deprived."