

**ELECTORAL REFORM SOCIETY /
CONSERVATIVE ACTION FOR ELECTORAL REFORM**

FRINGE MEEETING AT CONSERVATIVE PARTY CONFERENCE

CHAIR, KEN RITCHIE

My name is Ken Ritchie. I'm Chief Executive of the Electoral Reform Society. You see it was listed that there were going to be four speakers tonight. Well, I'm going to be a sort of participating Chair. Four speakers seemed rather a lot. And of course this meeting is being run by the Electoral Reform Society. At the end of it, there is separate event, a reception with CAER, Conservative Action for Electoral Reform. Now I know that many people might feel we want to use all the time at Conference in the intellectual discussion, rather than drinking, and there are others that may prefer at this stage to the give the discussion a miss and simply come along for the wine. Well that's fine, but you're all welcome to come for it all. I'm fiddling in my pockets here because I've just remembered that my mobile is switched on and it's always a good opportunity to remind others that, you know, nobody wants to be embarrassed. So we effectively have three speakers, but subject and open for debate, the fact that democracy is sick, we want to consider what it is that we can do about it. Democracy is Sick is a topic that we've been taking around all the Party Conferences this year, we notice even Electoral Commissioners come up an almost identical slogan, so that means it must be true. But what do we mean by that? People are clearly turning away from politics, at least from organised politics. People are still just as concerned with the big political issues, but they don't see that political parties and politicians are necessarily the people who are there to deal with it. We, in the Society, we have conducted research by opinion leader research, a number of focus groups around the country, all coming up with the same picture. That partly people see politics as being something that is very centralised, something generally conducted by white middle aged men in suits, conducting arguments as if it were a school debating society. What they want to see, they want to see a much more mature form of politics in which there is the rational discussion. Sure, you know, political discussion always is going to be robust, politics is always going to be competitive, competitive between ideas, but they're fed up seeing a form of politics and when it comes to election campaigns it's not a of people putting forward their positive ideas, so much of it is about simply rubbishing ... It's not the way that normal people conduct their affairs, they don't want to see their politicians conducting their affairs in that way. But that's easy enough to say, so our complaint is not the government, the government actually has done quite a lot in the field of constitutional change, it's probably made more constitutional changes than any of its predecessors. You might not regard all these changes as reforms, but it has made all these changes, but yet it has actually solved the problem. We have dismissed a lot of what they have done as being sticking plasters on the problem, and I'm not even sure that's correct because you know, sticking plaster at least keeps out infection and allows a wound to heal. I think a better description would have been papering over some fairly dangerous cracks, the fundamental things in our politics that we've got to change. But if we say that what we need is a new political culture, it gives us the question, well how do you set about changing politics culture? And we hope that we have got three speakers this evening that will be able to give us some idea of what it is that we could expect if we had a Conservative government, how it would tackle that problem. Now our speakers are Oliver Heald, Margot James and Ferdinand Mount and that's the order in which I'm going to invite them to speak. Oliver is the Member of Parliament for North East Hertfordshire, has been an MP since 1992, but more importantly for us, he has been for the last three years the Shadow Secretary for Constitutional Affairs and therefore the official voice of the Conservative Party, perhaps? Well a little bit off trigger perhaps then tonight. I do notice, Oliver from your website that your past experience involves engaging with the masses at Speakers Corner and interesting to see that that sort of background gives you anything that you can draw on to plan the way forwards. Oliver.

OLIVER HEALD, MP

Well thank you very much. I think it is important to engage with people, and just on the point about Speakers Corner, I mean I think it was a good thing that for many years the Conservatives went down there, stood on a soap box and we made our points, we got heckled and then we gave people a chance to always know that they could come along on a Sunday and ask us any question they liked and by goodness they did. But I think the first point I'd make is that if you look at political engagement, 1992 is a watershed. It was the General Election which had the largest turnout in very many years and at that election it was hotly contested, very, very close election and at the end the outcome was not what people had expected. A Conservative victory I think all the way through until quite shortly before polling day people had expected that the Labour Party would win and that it would be the change that people had expected. And since that time the level at which people have participated in our democracy has been at a lower level and 1997 was higher than 2001 but 2001 and was a very, very low level of participation and it hardly rose in 2005 and so I think we do have to ask, well why is it that people are turning away from politics. Now partly it is that the issues have changed. I mean when I was young we had the Cold War, we had President Kennedy who was striking new ground. We had real arguments about the role of young people and there were battles on the streets in Paris, but there was a very healthy argument in Britain. And I think that background has changed, but also the way in which our country's governed has changed. I mean it has become a very centralised system and it was Lord Butler, who when he was doing his report, he said this: 'We're a country where we suffer very badly from parliament not having sufficient control over the Executive and this is a very grave flaw.' And he went on to describe the 'sofa style government' in Number 10, where just a few people, the chosen few, sat round and governed the country and that isn't what the British expect from their democracy. And so I do think this issue of centralisation, which Ken mentioned, is a very important one. And of course it's not just Number 10. The government machine is really centred more in the Cabinet office which is also part of my area of responsibility and there we've seen a growth in the units which are used to shackle the other government departments, control the whole system and make sure that those people around the sofa get their way. And so I think that whole picture of a government by a few people, some of them not elected, is not an attractive one and I think people have got the idea that it's like this and it's turning them off. And for someone like Claire Short who is a senior government minister, now resigning and saying that she's going to fight for a hung parliament because she's so ashamed of Labour, that's partly because she was one of the people, whether you agree with her or not, who liked to argue her corner, feel that she was engaged in a proper democratic process. So we've said that one of the things that we'd like to do, or at least we've asked Ken Clarke to look at this, is to tackle this whole question of the very centralised nature of government and see if we can't find ways of giving parliament more power rather than the government and if we can't find a way of making people realise that they can make a difference through their democracy. And so the sort of things that we are looking at are the role of the Cabinet office, the way in which that operates, we're looking at whether parliament shouldn't acquire some of the powers which ministers have exercised through what are known as the prerogative powers. I mean the classic example is the decision on whether we go to war and we believe, or at least we're asking Ken to look at whether it would be possible to always involve parliament in those decisions so that you can't have a situation where

members of parliament have no real say in a decision of that importance. And there are other powers, like making treaties where we think parliament should have its say. I personally feel that committees in parliament could have more power. In other countries they do, they can vet appointments, they can make certain decisions as regards the budget. They have a real say. Now obviously you can't let it get to the point where the government has the inability to govern the country but you can get it to a point where there's some real accountability and so that to me is a very important thing, the centralised nature of government being changed. And then this theme that we've been putting forward this week of localism I think is again important. Letting people are local level, whether it's councillors or whether it's in the health service for example that people are actually deciding how services are commissioned, letting them have more choice and the ability to use local people to deliver services, we think that are important principles. And then I think the other point to make is that there's been quite a lot of constitutional change which has confused people as to exactly how the system works. I mean one example is with devolution of course it's something that we're embracing, but there is an imbalance in the system as David Mandel said today as far as England's concerned and we do need to look at that and so Ken Clark's looking at how we find something which is unionist but which tackles that problem and gives the English members of parliament perhaps a greater say on the English laws which are being passed. I could go on now to electoral matters. I mean I think it is true that Ken and I would differ as to what's wrong, but you look at a system where the Conservatives win the vote in England, sixty thousand more votes or so and yet end up with 93 less seats. Now Ken draws the conclusion, I'm sure, that we immediately need to move to STV for Westminster, proportional representation. I mean I personally think that as a country we value the constituency link between a member of parliament and his constituency and that it should just be one member of parliament for that constituency who takes account of the views of all the people who live there and is the voice of, for example in my case, North East Hertfordshire. Now it is fair to say that some people feel it's so important that it should be proportionate that that doesn't matter as much and that it's necessary to look at systems like AB plus and others and you know, it's a perfectly respectable debate to have, but my personal view is that the constituency link in the Commons, is something that is of crucial importance, and actually it's about the only thing people really like about their members of parliament, is that they stick up for them in parliament, they can go and see them and get them to act on their behalf. But I do think one thing about first past the post that is wrong is that the constituencies aren't equal sizes and so you end up with a situation where there are some Labour constituency which is 42 thousand for example, a Conservative constituency with 108, but I mean the average is six thousand difference and that does skew the system. And although it isn't the only reason that the Conservatives need to score a high percentage in order to win a General Election, it is a factor and it's one which everybody agrees is significant and I think we should change that myself. I think it's wrong to have a system which doesn't work as proportionately as it can if you believe, as I do, that first past the post is the answer. So that's a second area where I think electoral reform but not the sort that Ken would like is important. And then the third point I'd make is that I think with members of parliament there is an attitude amongst the public that we're in it for ourselves, we're all the same and nothing ever really gets done. Now if we reform the parliament I think we can make it more effective in that sense. I do think if we could have an independent body which set the pay and conditions for members of parliament and it was just an automatic thing, not MPs voting on it or anything like

that, they set it, it's an independent body and it became accepted then I think it would be right to take out the question of pay and rations from the political debate and have it dealt with outside. And so I think that would help as well, because it would change this perception that we're more interested in the perks than the principles. I could go on all night about constitutional affairs and the electoral system, but I hope that's a start about the way we're looking at it and we do have a very large agenda which Ken is now working through.

KEN RITCHIE

Thanks for that, Oliver. As you say a very large agenda and you have covered much of it. Obviously there are areas which are so open to debate, we may not agree on everything, but let's agree that there is a discussion to be had and I'm sure there's going to be time to have a little bit of that discussion very shortly tonight.

Our next speaker is Margot James. If democracy is sick then one of the symptoms of that disease is that we have a situation in which there are terrible gender imbalance in our political representation and it's not just that so many women feel that the style of politics that we've got is not for them. Mainly men having slanging matches which they want to see a much more constructive form of politics, so there's a whole area there. I was looking at the Observer, Margot has described you as 'a rising star in the Conservative Party and the most glamorous woman in politics at the moment.' Now there's nothing at all wrong with glamour, both sexes should strive for it, but we would certainly not have invited you simply on that basis and you would not have come on that basis. We have invited you because of your views and your views at the Vice Chair of the Party with that special responsibility for Women's Issues. Margot.

MARGOT JAMES

Thank you very much, Ken. Thank you very much for the invitation. I'm going to talk a little bit about the problems I see and some particular views I have on how much of a problem we've really got and what the nature of it is. But I was reflecting that if you go back to when Britain became a full democracy in 1928, the prime minister at the time, that universal suffrage was finally granted was Stanley Baldwin was prime minister I think on three occasions, and to look back and see the changes since then it's quite extraordinary. Baldwin used to go on his summer holidays to France for a whole month, nothing surprising about that I suppose, but he was uncontactable by telephone and he took great pleasure in not reading a newspaper for the duration. Thirty years later, Harold Macmillan, on returning from a trip to the U.S. which his Chancellor Selwyn Lloyd, he was met by a solitary BBC journalist as he came down the steps of the plane who asked if the prime minister had any comment for the BBC, so he turned to Selwyn Lloyd and he said, 'Selwyn, do we have comment for the BBC?' And Selwyn Lloyd said, 'No, I don't think so prime minister.' And with that they just waved their way down the steps to the waiting limousine, no further comment required. So it's extraordinary when you look back and I compare those days to the present day where we have twenty-four hour media scrutiny, we have a government of which far more is demanded, yet a government which has far less control over events and the end of an age of deference. But we still have, of course, the same basic democratic system underpinning all that, the same voting system. So the conventional thinking, and I've had a little look at obviously the materials and the thinking of your organisation and also the Power Report that came out a few months ago which was a huge investigation into these issues and indeed the Hansard Society and the Electoral Commission's work and the conventional thinking links falling Party membership, a decreasing voter turnout, along with polling data to demonstrate that people are very disaffected and becoming apathetic with the current system into one single diagnosis that requires radical action. And I think the things that leapt off the page to me were, the point about women that you've mentioned and I think that is very true, women are very turned off by the nature of political discourse, but aligned with that we have very low polling figures among young people and also very low turnout figures among the marginalised communities. The poor people living in poorer areas. And those things are of great concern. But the sort of things that are advanced as the reasons for that are quite familiar. I live in a safe seat, everybody knows what the result's going to be, there's no point voting, there's no difference between the parties anyway. MPs can't do much because basically all the decisions are really taken at the centre around the prime minister's kitchen table and so what can MPs do anyway, what is the point of voting? And the other thing that is very clear out of all this, a dislike of the Party system. A feeling that the Party system of necessity really, the political parties cover such a wide canvas of issues and take a line on so many different things that for most people to try to put across by a whole panoply of issues under one line, is a difficulty and unless they're willing to vote for minority parties that just stand for one thing, like the BNP and the UKIP. But are all these new phenomena? I don't think they are. If you look back to the 50s Hugh Gaitskell and I quote from his treatise on Public Condemnation of Political Parties, he wrote: 'Some people complain that the differences between the parties are too great. There's too much back biting, too much abuse and the whole thing's a bear garden. While others express resentment, but they really agree on almost everything, but the whole thing is too much like a tea party, that it makes no

difference who is power and that in consequence the electors are apathetic.’ Hailsham then, a decade or so later, came up with a memorable description of the British Constitution as ‘an elective dictatorship, all too much power crowding around the centre.’ And as for public cynicism with spin and a feeling that politicians are dishonest, I think Harold Wilson had his fair share of that criticism. Do you remember, ‘the pound in your pocket won’t be affected’ when he devalued the pound? That was a famous statement that’s lived on. And I think Labour were even more damaged by the cynicism with which Barbara Castle was let down by Wilson and Callaghan over in place of strife. So has that much really changed in the diagnosis that we all seek to label our political system today? My view is that I would add to the things that I think we’re all probably agreed on, there are problems with our Constitution and our democracy at the moment. I would add a few more contemporary issues. I will try not to be too party political about this, but I do feel that this government, particularly, has spent millions of pounds and millions of people’s hours trying to bring law and order to our streets. Trying to bring decent educational standards to our secondary schools, and they have promised, right from the beginning not to increase direct taxation in order to pay for all this. So they’ve increased taxes in a million and one other ways. People feel the cost of all these programmes in their pockets but they don’t feel the results of them in the benefits they get from this huge investment in public services. And I think that does lead people to feel that nothing can be done, that too many issues like unaddressed and not for the want of trying. So of course people become more apathetic. And then they ask themselves, well how much power does government really have in the face of global trends? Anyway, I come from Coventry and I think that most voters lives in Coventry are affected, and have been over the last three decades, by decisions in the boardrooms of companies like Peugeot and BMW than they are by the decisions of their individual MPs. And then you become also disaffected because so much is governed by trans-national agreements, the EU in particular. I’ve got a cousin in Coventry whose business was in the meat and live stock industry and this business was almost ruined by the EU regulations. He had to close his abattoir and hundreds of abattoirs up and down the country had to close because of those EU regulations with the result that our cattle had to travel miles for slaughter at great detriment to animal welfare and the risk of disease. So all of these things I think combine to create a sense that not only are the lives of citizens, but also the lives of politicians are almost ungovernable and at the mercy of events that are dictated many miles away. And the final point I’d make along this theme is the government’s unwillingness to challenge vested authorities. This, I think, is another area in which people feel that there is no one listening to them, and by vested interests I don’t just mean big business, I also mean the vested interests of the judicial establishment. People know that there’s something deeply wrong with this country when it comes to our criminal justice system yet nobody seems to be able to do anything about it. Tony Blair passes law after law after law and nothing changes in our courts and people are very fed up about that and have the feeling that it is another reinforcement of this feeling that nobody can be done, so why bother to vote? And why does it take thousands of working class people, the decision they make to vote for the BNP in order for the government to wake up to the iniquitousness of the council housing allocation schemes and the whole system of local government patronage in some of our inner city areas. That is a scandal. Those people have been disenfranchised. No wonder they feel apathetic. So by way of conclusion I feel that much does need to be done but I think it is very important that we get the diagnosis right, and it’s also important that people realise that actually

there are still ways that they can impact the political process, but it is disappointing really to see that the results of the survey that was published by the Hansard Society and the Electoral Commission where the authors noted that most people have limited enthusiasm for energy intensive political action, preferring passive action if they prefer any action at all. And Professor Gary Stoker, quoted in the report, goes further. He says, 'People believe that they are entitled to have their voice heard yet for many reasons fewer are prepared to make the effort to play a meaningful part in the increasingly technocratic arguments of formal politics. People expect a right of veto over a game they no longer play, they are more demanding yet more apathetic.' So I think that we have to really engage with people to change this culture, but people do have to realise that good hospitals and good schools don't just fall out of the sky at the end of their street, that it does require more than just complaining to get things to be changed. In business if you undertake contractual relationships with suppliers of any kind, but they banking, insurance, advertising agencies, clients who just sit back and say well I've got that service now, it's all going to fall into my lap are going to be sorely disappointed. The only clients that get a good service are the ones that are prepared to engage with the providers and take on more of a partnership approach. And I think that we do have to remember that citizens, all citizens have responsibilities as well as rights and one of their responsibilities is to contribute to the revival of our democratic process and that if all that we are prepared to do for our democracy is to put a cross on a piece of ballot paper every four years, then we really cannot be surprised when our interests come up against those of the state and we don't always come off best. So whilst I do agree that much needs to be done I also think we've got to get the diagnosis right, otherwise we might be proposing the wrong solutions. And I hope that maybe during the discussion I can give some of my ideas as to what some of those solutions might be, that conscious of time I think you might want to move on.

KEN RITCHIE

Many thanks. I'll remember that your solutions are to come. We'll pick you up on that later. Our third speaker, Ferdinand Mount, worked with the prime minister's Policy Unit back in the 1980s. He has been editor of the Times Literary Supplement. He has been a Director of the Centre for Policy Studies, but he's here tonight because he was Vice Chair of the Power Commission. Margot has already mentioned the Power Commission. I don't propose to say anything myself about what it has recommended, I will leave that to Ferdinand. But I will say this. It was an absolute landmark report brought out just earlier this year, just before the local elections. If people don't have a copy I believe it is still there online, but I'll warn you if you're printing it out, it's about 400 pages. But 400 pages crammed full of a detailed look at what is wrong with our democracy and quite a menu of things that are there. We might disagree with the odd recommendation but we cannot disagree with the fact that they're all issues that need to be discussed and on which there needs to be action. Ferdinand.

FERDINAND MOUNT

Thank you very much, Ken. After those two very thoughtful contributions which have gone over this very large expansive policy territory I'm not quite sure what's the best thing to do, but I think, looking forward rather than back, rather than go into what the Power Commission recommended, many of those recommendations have already been mentioned, I'd like to go forward in my new role as a very junior member of Ken Clarke's task force. Another more senior members if just through that doors there, George Young, haranguing another audience and I think it's a real sign that things are changing, that there are by my computation something in double figures at this Conference of fringe meetings addressing this sort of agenda in one way or another which a couple of years ago would have been unthinkable. Unthinkable too would be the vote – I didn't quite get how it went but a huge number of people voted in the hall, I still haven't got in 'cause I've only just got my badge five minutes ago – in favour of a referendum. Your Our Say, Sarah Khan's great initiative to introduce that right of referendum initiatives which so many very, very sober countries already have like Switzerland and New Zealand and many states in the United States. So things are changing fast. So I'd just like to, as it were, go through the card a bit and talk about what seems quite easy to do and what seems much more difficult to do. Some of the things that Oliver mentioned, which, as he said, I mean Ken Clarke is already looking at and David Cameron has already expressed enthusiasm for, for example the idea that the old royal prerogatives in their modern form should be subject to a parliamentary vote, that seems quite easy, I think there's widespread support for that and only the sort of the old holdouts in the existing government, I think Gordon Brown is quite keen on that, and there are quite a few other things in that line. The restoration of the procedures of Cabinet government, perhaps by some new code of practice such as they have in Germany. So that to get them off the sofa and into Cabinet committee and discuss things in Cabinet, so that things are gone through properly and not just dreamed up on the wing for the sake of the next headline, that too I think is quite possible to bring about and so too is a larger role for select committees, after all you don't have to go back very far, you only have to go back when Norman St John Stevens was Leader of the House, before that the role of select committees was really pretty limited, you just had the ones inherited from Gladstone which have been very important, Public Accounts Committee and so on. That huge expansion of select committees has not yet been matched by a huge expansion in their powers and relevance and we want to see that. The English dimension, that I think is not beyond the wit of man. There are all sorts of ways in which you could do it. You could, for example have an English stage when the Speaker would certify that a Bill was an in England only Bill, that there would be an English stage in its passing through parliament and on which only English MPs could vote and then it would be a UK vote either before or after because you have this problem that England is so much the dominant partner, 85% of the population or most of the power that almost anything which is an England only vote has consequences, but the rest of the UK, most notably of course financial consequences if money is going to be spent on England and public services in England, that's proportionately less for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. But I can see that that is a tolerable solution can be found to that without going to what seems to me to be the extreme measure of an English parliament which there is a small body of enthusiasts for that, but I don't think that's a runner. And then moving on to parties and elections, clearly funding has got to be cleaned up. Clearly corruption of voting in postal voting has got

to be cleaned up. Both of those two things will have to be done and no party can afford to be left out of that cleansing process otherwise they'll look like we're defending the indefensible. So then get on to the more difficult things. Open primaries. Now we've started experimenting with that. The other parties are taking it a bit more gingerly. But I sort of feel that on present form this is going to be certainly an opening up of particularly a more sadly shrunken Conservative Associations, but I don't see yet the signs that it's going to have that huge sweep that open primaries in some states in the United States have. At present, as at present, I may be wrong, that it's really got to be that kind of vision about it and I hope I am wrong and I hope we can broaden the idea so that people that are only very loosely connected with the Conservative Party, if at all, can have a voice in the selection process at some stage. Then we come to localism. We're all localists nowadays, even those who quite clearly aren't and who really immediately any serious proposal for local devolution is – they say well you've got to stop there being a post code lottery. But as Douglas Castle argues, I think that's a give away phrase, post code lottery, because that is what happens to you, you have no power to alter it short of moving house. If you have genuine local power and your local services are not up to the standard of the surrounding areas then you have the power to do something about it. But that has to come with genuine devolution of financing so that local authorities are seriously self financing, as of course they were for most of the twentieth century. If you go back to 1900, 90% of local revenue was locally raised and locally determined and this great shower of leaflets, guidance and instruction and regulation from Whitehall would have been unimaginable. But at the moment I'm very, very dubious as to whether any party really has the enthusiasm to go the whole way on that. Whether it will always be pulled back at the last minute. We may get rid of capping, that's better than nothing but I think the understanding of how much damage the centralisation has done so that we are now more centralised than France, notorious throughout the past three centuries as being the most centralised country in Europe. The damage that that has done has still not penetrated to the Westminster village in full measure and that's a long way to go. Then finally we come to the issue for which this great society is founded, electoral reform. Now I've met converts in all directions. I am a convert to proportional representation. I've spent most of my journalistic life spouting with great vigour the arguments against PR. The lack of decisiveness in the reforming of governments and all the other things that can be said against it. But I think that what swung me was the spectacle at the last election, and indeed the election before that, but particularly the last election, of both the main political parties boasting we've got these two percent of voters who really count locked up in our voter vaults, we know who they are, we know where they live, we don't need to canvas the rest of the country, this is all that counts. And that seems to me as scandalous a limitation of democracy as the more obvious one in which Lord Sainsbury finances the Labour Party and Stuart Wheeler finances the Tory Party. As it happens I was at school with both of them. They're very nice chaps but I don't see that they should have the right be the generator of party wisdom. But I think rather than give yet another sort of sinner come to repentance homily in favour of the virtues of PR, which whatever its disadvantage, it certainly does induce parties to seek out every last vote because every last vote will add to their total of MPs. I'd just like to sort of note here too, we are in the midst of an extraordinary process of change which we haven't exactly sort of deliberately sought out, but now we have every known form of PR operating within the United Kingdom and the next one up is local government in Scotland. I haven't heard any complaints from the Scots about the operation of PR for the Scottish

parliament and indeed no complaints really from the Conservative Party because without the operation of PR there wouldn't be much of a Conservative and Unionist voice in Edinburgh. So we take that rather quietly as a little bon much, but the belief which would have been axiomatic twenty years ago, that there should be no form of proportional representation in these islands, has long disappeared and I think after the PR for local government, a reformed House of Lords has been an excellent scheme put forward by Ken Clarke and the last Robin Cook and indeed our neighbour next door, George Young, for a partially elected House of Lords. You may or may not agree with that, you may want it wholly elected or not, but what is clear is that if there is going to be an elected House of Lords, is it going to be elected by some form of proportional representation? Against Douglas Castle's got a nice alternative which is to have all the heads of local government in all the boroughs and counties sitting and give it a sort of – the original House of Lords after all was bringing the earls and barons in from these regions to give a regional provincial voice in the affairs of the nation and Douglas' scheme would work quite nicely. But I think it's more likely that we shall because the electoral principle is much the strongest principle in all democratic discussion. I think we shall within the next ten years have some sort of partially elected House of Lords and it will be elected by PR. So we'll then have a period in which virtually all elections in these island will be held by some form of Pr except the ones for Westminster. Now we may be happy to stop it there, but we may – particularly if you get a hung parliament or an outrageous result which none of us all really mentioned which is extremely likely in which the Conservatives have much the largest share of the vote, but still don't have anything like an overall majority and there's a Lib-Lab pact which is also extremely likely, then that might be the final shock which converts people to electoral reform in one shape or another. So Margot's already mentioned, Harold Macmillan, I will mention his other famous things, what decides things, 'events, dear boy, events.' And I think that may turn out of the case for proportional representation as for quite a lot of other things.

KEN RITCHIE

Many thanks for that. I can see there's a huge amount of scope there for questions and discussion. However, what I'm going to do first, Oliver has got to go and attend to business of Party funding and therefore if there are questions that people would like to direct particularly to Oliver to begin with, could I take these.

AUDIENCE QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

Thank you very much. I'm so old, Oliver that I remember long before I was elected to parliament joining the Conservative Party in the day of Macmillan and McLeod where we believed that the ultimate bastion against a wholly ... over centralised in those days Bennite state, was the power of local government and I had to say I stood and watched, having been elected in '79, as largely the Conservative Party dismembered local government in many respects and it hasn't stopped there. So I share the views that have been expressed about the need for local government. But it seems to me there's an anomaly there. Tony Blair had to take his own party and change it fundamentally and he could only do that by taking central power. I suspect David Cameron has not got a wholly dissimilar task on his hands. How do you actually square that degree of the need to over centralise for perfectly laudable reasons but at the same time measure that against giving greater autonomy to local government for all the reasons that have been advanced? It seems to me the other anomaly is this. It's been mentioned frequently that people now – and one of the reasons political party membership has haemorrhaged is that people are actually interested in single issues. They will go to Green Peace or whatever it might be, they will give their allegiance to an organisation which they think can deliver on single issues. Now political parties of course at the activity of that, political parties give you a package, but it seems to me the whole system that we've got, the electoral system, really looking at Ferdinand's point, is essentially saying look we've got a package, you've got to vote Conservative and if we don't give prominence to a particular issue that you think is important well that's tough, but you've got to take the package as a whole. There is no desire or not imperative to actually search out alliances on particular issues among different political parties and for me one of the main arguments in favour of a proportional system, that actually it does force political parties to try to find alliances amongst other people of other political persuasions on particular issues and advance them. And I would just end by saying I do hope that the Conservative Party will not beguile itself into thinking that an equality of constituents in constituencies numerically is actually going to solve the problem. It's not. It's far more fundamental. It is the people who are disenfranchised of Conservative voters voting in Bradford who are disenfranchised whatever the size of the constituency is in comparison with others that is actually dealing with a great deal of disillusion leading to disillusion at the moment and I don't think you have to end up with members of parliament greatly distanced from those parts that they represent. That's a different debate, but I do hope that the party is not going to say we're going to solve the problem just by making all the constituencies of equal size.

KEN RITCHIE

I'm going to take two other hands up. Can I ask you to be fairly succinct. Oliver needs to go in about a couple of minutes so if you want to go on then there won't be the opportunity for getting an answer to the question. Stewart.

STEWART STAINER

Just one question about parliament and the role of parliament. Now I went to hear Ken Clarke give a lecture to the Constitution last week and he something along the lines of 'parliament's got weaker than it's ever been during my political career,' and I asked him about this because the perception to me seems to be that the strength of parliament has a direct relation to the kind of size of the overall majority really. I

mean it's kind of a lazy thing to say oh parliament's not as strong as it used to be, it's something that's quite easy to say, but is there actually strong evidence. And I wanted to ask you, in your experience as an MP and the other panellists, do you think that parliament has declined in its role and importance and if so in which ways, and in which ways will we seek to change that under a Conservative government.

ANTHONY B from CENTRE FORWARD, another life that defeated the candidate over the water in a constituency of 108 thousand, great good luck in trying to equalise that one. How would you answer Ferdinand's point that, the two percent point? Cause that strikes me if that is successful and that will become a more compelling problem, because of the power of computers and money etcetera. How would you answer that one?

OLIVER HEALD

Right, well just starting if I may with Keith's point. I think the point that Keith makes about the single issue groups who campaign passionately just on one particular issue. That is an important, very important element in our politics now and it's something that we forgot about slightly when we were in government and we were getting all this excellent advice from the civil servants without really going out and making our number with a lot of these groups, who actually – you may not have agreed with everything they said but there were points they were making which we were just ignoring because we sort of got out of the habit of going round and of course these groups were developing in bigger numbers and becoming a much more significant part. I mean we forget to do the politics for about ten years I think when we were in government. We were just in such a long time. So one of the things I did when I was on our health team was to go round all the groups in the health field, and my goodness they were helpful to us. You know our mental health, I mean Rethink Severe Mental Illness were fantastic in helping us to shape our mental health policy, the same was true in other areas where some really good ideas came forward. Now, you don't need to satisfy every group on every issue. I mean was it Mayor Couch who said, 'if a man agrees with me on seven out of ten issues he's a great guy and he'll probably vote for me. If he agrees with me on all ten, hey he must be crazy.' And there is something in that and I think that we do need to engage with these groups. Now PR is actually a bit of a hindrance I mean I think in that, because what you end with after the election is probably, what, in our system three, say four parties with a say and they may well not reflect any of these views as their core focus. So I think by having two – or possibly two and three quarters or two and a half main parties, at least you have the duty to build your coalition and it has to be broad means, which means you do need to go around all the groups who are campaigning on everything. And I mean Evan Burke, little platoons, I mean we were the party who invented going out and talking to everybody with an interest that might be represented. Local government totally agree with you, we should never have emasculated it and quite a lot of the problems we got ourselves into in government were because the local authorities didn't have the power to address a particular issue and I remember when I was PPS to William Waldegrave and we were having all those crises with the west country fishermen, I mean my goodness, the west country county councils and authorities they weren't allowed to spend any money helping the fishermen, and so it was an absolutely mad situation and we must be able to give more discretion and more power locally. The two percent point, I mean I think that this question of targeting is something that is very important in terms of political campaigning and there's no doubt that if you were in a seat with a

majority of 90 or whatever you got a lot more correspondence than you did in some of the others. And I don't know that the public necessarily welcomed it and I mean if you think about my own constituency which wouldn't have been considered a marginal, I mean we still campaigned hard, we had three or four public meetings with all the candidates, everybody was putting out a good number of leaflets. I mean the case was made. Now if there are areas where that doesn't happen then I agree with you it's a bad thing, but I don't think it's inevitable that political parties will be as complacent as perhaps Ferdie suggested, although you know we often give the impression that this is all some frightfully technical matter and that the two percent are ones that matter, but I don't think that's what happens on the ground. And there was one other, parliament being weakened. Now when I first got in in '92 the Opposition used to keep us up half the night. People like Bob Cryer, oh yes, Dennis, Dennis Skinner, the Beast of Bolsover, and they would make it very difficult for us to get through legislation that they didn't like. There were all sorts of things you could do which you can't do now because the government didn't like it when we started doing these things in 1997, I mean Eric Forth and some of the rest of us we used to try and talk measures out and really put up a stiff resistance. So parliament lost all those powers to delay legislation significantly and so on, and it went too far. I mean we started on the basis we'd be prepared to agree sensible programming for Bills, but the government got so impatient at wanting to ram through vast numbers of Bills that they just forgot about that and started putting forward proposals that meant you had, you know, less than a minute to consider an Amendment, and I can remember on some very important Bills, like the Identity Cards Bill, third reading, the report stage, I believe half the Amendments weren't even debated. And so parliament's been weakened procedurally in that way, and if you take that together with the point Ferdi was making and I think I made about way in which the Cabinet office units have been built up so that the Downing Street machine is going into every part of government and those few people around the couch are making all the decisions, I mean that is sidelining parliament because it's sidelining the Cabinet, it's sidelining all those conversations that one used to have with the Cabinet minister, saying, come on stick up for this position or that, I mean it's all just broken down. Democracy has sickened and withered but not quite died.

KEN RITCHIE

Well look plenty of other opportunity we're going to have for discussion with Margot and Ferdinand, but can we just thank Oliver for his contribution tonight.

OLIVER HEALD

Well thanks for having me.

MARGOT JAMES

Just to respond to a couple of the points raised. The targeting issue, the two percent I think you called it. In practice I agree with Oliver – in practice it doesn't work as effectively as a marketing text book would dictate that it should work and this is because I fought a safe Labour seat at the last election, Holborn and St Pancras, there was never any hope of my winning that seat. But I dedicated a lot of effort to it and I had supporters who were very reluctant to go anywhere else to campaign. My job as a camper was to deliver a respectable result in Holborn and St Pancras and we took our responsibility to Conservative voters and potential voters in that constituency very seriously to give them their democratic choice, but of course we were under pressure

from Central Office to go to what was called our nearest target seat. So we went, but it was a bit of a token gesture in reality and in most cases I think that is true. So I don't think in practice it is such a problem. But I think the pressures to centralise parties as well – your point Keith, as well as government – I think there is pressure on David Cameron from the modernising wing of the party just to centralise more. To be impatient about the progress we're making with our candidate selection procedures. My feeling and as someone who's in part responsible for seeing those procedures through is that I would rather make decent progress on the subject of female and black and minority ethnic candidate selection with out stripping the powers of the local associations, I would rather make less progress, meaningful progress, but less progress and have autonomy respected than I would centralise it all as Labour did with their all women shortlists. I would be prepared to consider going down that route if our measures really didn't work, but the signs, touch wood, are that they are working and we've gone from the position where we had 12% of seats that were winnable, selecting female candidates for the last election, to a position at the moment where the running total is about 30% if not slightly more, it's about a third that are selecting women and 10% black and minority ethnic candidates. So I think that's very good progress. I don't want to see too much more centralisation on that front.

I'm sure there was enormous enthusiasm amongst all your supporters in Holborn and St Pancras to stay there to get rid of the incumbent. I think anybody would have actually shared that sentiment. But I think there's very strong evidence that actually we got it wrong. I mean you say that actually Ferdinand's 2% point doesn't really work. I think you'll probably right in the Conservative Party and I think we lost, we were losers as a result of that. The Labour Party were far better organised. They actually just fucked whole resources out of the so called safe Labour seat and redeployed them elsewhere, and that's been their policy for a very long time. They've actually been better at Party organisation than we have for quite some time now and I think their ability to do that meant that actually they succeeded far better than we did. It still doesn't invalidate the point that's made that should one be doing that? Should one not be trying to get rid of the bearded wonder in Holborn and St Pancras, because actually the accumulation of votes could actually achieve that object, but rather than having to take people reluctantly, as you rightly say away from their patch and having to go elsewhere.

FERDINAND MOUNT

Under fire from Margot slightly, delicately rephrase the 2% point. It's not so much that it actually prevents parties from making an effort in hopeless seats, or indeed in very safe ones. It is partly a matter of the perception is that people feel, people outside the political world, feel that they aren't much noticed unless they are in one of these key seats. On the centralising in order to decentralise I think this applies both to the party and to government. I think we've had twenty years in both parties of centralising in both respects and I think that is part of the disillusion and that I think it is time – I don't think David Cameron will lose anything either in the vigour of local associations or in the effective improvement of schools in bad areas, and all the other things for which central powers are doing. I think the age of that centralising in order to decentralise, which after all was Margaret Thatcher's – she didn't say that but that was in fact what she did was to centralise in order to decentralise and sometimes she did decentralise and sometimes she just centralised and left – you know I can

remember when the Dept of Education was just a tiny little office by Waterloo Station, could sort of hold two men and a dog and now it's an absolutely vast great power spewing out advice and instruction. So you know, I mean I think this is or ought to be a new era in which we do genuinely trust the people and local people to make their own decisions. And in party funding, for example - I'm not sure we've got the answer right, but in the Power Commission we were desperately trying to find a means of making sure that the new funding went to local parties and that rather than just be sent straight off to Central Office where it was spent on very expensive advertising agents putting up rather embarrassing hoardings - so you know I mean I think local, local, local like the estate agents.

KEN RITCHIE

I've got two questions, one and a lady.

As an elector of Holborn and St Pancras incidentally I'd like to confirm the Conservatives ran a fine energetic campaign there and in the nicest possible way I hope we don't see Margot again, because she's gone on to better things. But we're missing the point in a sense about 2%. It's not about party activity on the ground which I think is probably true of all parties, that we can't necessarily move people around like pins on a map, but that we've got diminishing numbers of party activists who are doing that sort of thing and party campaigning in elections is centralising these huge phone banks and with these scrupulously market tested strategies for the national campaign rather than local activity. And is this which is all aimed at the 2% claimed to sort of repeat their prejudices back to them, appeal to these particular voters and in one mentions of history, I mean it's no accident I think - and it's not inconsistent - that the parties in the 50s were criticised at the same time for being too alike and were also being too negative about each other, because when parties are too much alike, when they're talking the same language who appeal to the same group of people, all you've got left really is nastiness and saying the other lot are less competent than us and that's all you've got. There's no battle of ideas really. And one of the merits of getting the votes away from this 2% of people is we can have more interesting, more varied ideas discussed in politics which will hopefully help increase interest and participation.

I think one thing, the recent goings on by the Labour Party have affected the whole body politic. I think if you've got to realise that, that they have done so much damage, people feel they're being dictated to, which they are. In local government we are being blackmailed because we don't do the little boxes and do what - we're going to be named and shamed and we don't get the money and that goes for all the other agencies and organisations. And that effect I think is going to be quite difficult to overcome because it will go on, I guess until the next General Election by spin or whatever. So I think that is a very serious matter. I'm 83 now, so I've seen things go but at the end of the war I was ticked off firmly by the Labour Party because these wonderful big meetings you had for party politics, they were organised by one party but they actually had everybody there, and when they told me that I should not be there, how dare I come to a meeting when I was in uniform. Well as I couldn't get out of uniform I didn't join the Labour Party. So that was the sort of thing which influenced me to join or not join. The Liberal Party were ever so nice - they're

everything to everybody because they change from one ward to the next and one constituency to suit, so they're still really exactly – They walked about in the North Croydon by election in chains and we never did work out quite what it was all about. So I've been all the way over the country canvassing, both as a trained agent and otherwise in party politics one way or another and I think that – I've been a councillor now for 24 years in a Labour ward.

- Well done

And the only time I'm vulnerable is a General Election because if it's in any way favourable to the Labour Party my Labour voters will obviously go party political on the national basis and I'm at a disadvantage because they just put the crosses straight the way down the paper and fair enough, I expect that. I won the last one. But I think the test I've made is that people have got to learn to trust their candidate. Very difficult if you're a first time candidate, but once that it's up to you to fight the way through and prove that you mean business, that you're interested in the local people, I think whatever else you do or don't do reform or whatever you do, that factor must never be forgotten. It's what you do, how you come across. How you participate in their lives, how you belong to them – or do you just go to meetings and go home? And I think that the power machine of some parties is dangerous, terribly dangerous. Undemocratic in certain respects, you might say, but that can have an influence, if your party machine is adequate it will bulldoze what the opinion of anybody is. And the Labour Party do, they take whole families to the poll – or they used to before postal voting became so popular. And one person said to me very seriously on one occasion, 'that's a joke. I don't mind being taking the poll if I'm voting for you.' But I think it is a person thing and please may I make a plea to anybody here who has an influence. Will you get rid of Central Office and bulldoze it because it is the most dangerous factor and it does more harm to the Conservative cause than almost anything else, and if I've put my foot in it, I've put my foot in it.

KEN RITCHIE

Well we will pass that comment on. Those last few contributions have been more in the nature of very interesting observations rather than questions, but anyone want to respond?

I think the whole thing now is a bit more of a discussion because you've laid down the fairest facts, it's now an opinion on why we may or may not agree with what you've said.

MARGOT JAMES

Well I'd like to just link a couple of points that both of you made in fact because the point you were saying – and thank you very much for your compliments on our campaign, much appreciated, but you were talking about the newer ways of campaigning, the telephone banks and the central campaigning and the targeting. And I think that we will – I'm sure that we will do what we think we have to do as party to win within an ethical framework and if the evidence shows that that kind of campaigning works, I think we'll see more of it. Having said that I'm not sure it will work unless it's very sensitively applied to local issues because I want to take up the point that you were making – Eileen was making, about the need for local issues to dominate and for candidates to be seen as part of their local community and I think that that hasn't change. And one of the Oliver's colleagues, Grant Shaps who won in

Welling Garden and Hatfied, or Welling and Hatfield, his campaign is a very interesting proof of what you were saying. He was intensely local in all the issues he adopted, and anyone can take a look at on his website, Grant Shaps website, it's a very good site, and he got for his labours I think an 8% swing which is more than twice, if not three times the average swing at the last election and his turnout was high. I don't recall what exactly it was but it was at least 65%.

Mine's always high.

And yours is always high. There it is. So that works, local works. So I think that the immense opportunities afforded by all this telephone campaigning and so on will have to be married in some way to that intense localism that we require in order for it to be really effective. You also mentioned the damage that Labour has done and I think that is a very important point and I hope that the way we respond to that is a patient and long term strategy of not falling into the trap of being like them. And there is a terrible temptation to go that way, to accept that the rules of the game are all about media manipulation and bullying editors to write your point of view. And I just hope and pray that if, and hopefully when, David Cameron becomes prime minister that the little circle of advisors that are very close knit around him at the moment, don't go the same way as people like Alistair Campbell and use their own positions in a power concentrated hungry way. There's a real temptation for people to do that, and as a party and I hope as a Leader, David resists that and maintains his openness on the assumption of power. And I can't agree with you about Central Office I'm afraid really because as a candidate last time and I mean the CCHQ really were a tremendous support and help. Yes, sometimes they get things wrong and I don't think they're the most popular people at this Conference for obvious reasons. I mean I know the police had their role to play but whatever happened it was a disaster. But a lot of what they do is very beneficial I think to the party, so I won't be even necessarily passing that particular comment on. And my final comment, sorry to say, I know what you think about the billboards and the posters and so on, I've been in the advertising business for a long time and I think that's a brilliant branding, I really, really do. It's so versatile, it's so fresh, it so says what David Cameron's all about and I think it's great.

FERDINAND MOUNT

I wasn't thinking about the wobbly tree, I was really thinking about the demonise.

MARGOT

Oh that was terrible, that was dreadful. I couldn't agree more.

FERDINAND MOUNT

One way in which I think the Centre can help – and actually under David Cameron is helping local candidates is by broadening the conversation to talk about a whole lot of things which we never used to talk about. I was very struck by this because I was part of the team putting together the 1983 election Manifesto and I put in what I thought was a rather brilliant, if somewhat flowery passage, about mountain and moor land, our wonderful heritage of our landscape and I was told by Nigel Lawson and Norman Tebitt in no uncertain terms that this wasn't the kind of slop we didn't want in our Manifesto. And as I was passing the monitor getting my badge this evening I saw David Davis, not particularly sort of sloppy kind of person, speaking in precisely

those terms about mountain and moorland and how precious we hold our country. So all those issues which are loosely called environment but cover much wider areas are things which conservatives haven't spoken nearly enough about although they are Conservative issues and I think that's one of the really refreshing things and I think that in a way is one of the sort best things that the Centre can you know, widen things out so that local candidates will much more naturally take part in efforts to save things and to be involved and not be a kind of detached rather weird race of people who are only interested in a rather small bunch of issues.

I was interested in Margot's opening comment about citizens having responsibilities to the democratic process. I think we've now achieved between clients and service providers having a much more involved relationship and I wonder if you could flesh out some of those ideas.

At one of the other Party Conferences someone threw down a challenge to Labour, they were talking about Labour's low percentage of the vote that they got in the last General Election, 35% or 20% of the electorate and they threw down the question how low can you go? 31% of the next election and will that still be democratic, even in 2005 there was a lot of public feeling against what Labour got and I want to throw that back to the Conservatives, how low could you go? Would you be happy if the Conservatives got 32% or so of the vote but the most seats and formed a government or where do you think something's now gone wrong there and we need to change that?

KEN RITCHIE

I'm going to use my position as Chair to throw the final question to you and it follows on really from that one. Ferdinand, you referred to events as being the things that often make changes in politics. Thinking ahead to the next election there was a little piece in the Evening Standard just earlier in the week in which Francis Maude was suggesting that yes it was a very difficult mountain winning for the Conservatives. Given that there is this present bias in the system because of the distribution of the Conservative vote where it doesn't convert into seats as well as the Labour vote. Things might change, but that certainly is the position at the moment. The bookmakers don't think that you're going to win the next election in the sense of having an overall majority in the commons, but they don't think that Labour is going to do that either, which takes us into new territory. We could have a hung parliament which could mean that we have got somebody trying to govern as a minority government, we could have a coalition. But in these situations it's almost inevitable that the Liberal Democrats are going to be saying, well look, you know, the price of support is going to be a change in the electoral system. Do you actually see at that point, and I'm sorry that Oliver is not here to throw in his view on this. Do you see in that position that the Conservative Party is going to be prepared to make the move?

MARGOT JAMES

Well in reverse order I'll do my best to answer those questions. Well they're linked actually, aren't they? How low could you go, the question. I mean I don't think it will be possible for the Conservative Party under the current system to win with a popular vote of less than 35% or probably less than 37% in fact, even 40. You're the expert, but I mean we'd need more than Labour to form a government and I'm afraid I think

on this issue that the voting system will only change when it becomes clearly in one of the major party's electoral interests for it so to do. We might be approaching that point. I'm not sure we are however, but certainly the distribution of votes system, as regards the Conservative Party is a big negative. However, I think there are other problems that we have electorally as a party in Scotland and Wales that are just as bad, I think, as the electoral system and I think changing the electoral system is not going to change the fact that it is extremely difficult for us to re-galvanise our organisation in Scotland certainly and to a slightly less extent in Wales. What would the Conservatives do if we did get a majority but not a big enough majority? I think that we would hold out against Proportional Representation. I think that the Liberal Democrats would probably try to go with whichever party would give them PR and I don't think either party would and I think they'd be so keen, after all these years, to get a few government departments under their belt that they would just go with it. That's my cynical view of Liberal Democrats. And the other point that came up about ideas for involving people more in government. I think one of my worries is that people seem to expect that they can just put a cross on the ballot paper, if that and have decent government fall into their laps and I think that's a mistake. I think that people should take more advantage of the opportunities for consultation. However, I do hesitate, because I think that the quality of some of the consultation I see going on is appalling. It's not the nature of how it's done, it's the cynical way that the decisions are all made and then there's surveys handed out to people and that is ridiculous. Health, a perfect example. I mean in my Council in Kensington and Chelsea I've become aware, because I know some doctors, that the PCT is definitely going to close a palliative care centre and they've got ideas of re-drawing it so that it's not a – I won't go into the detail but they're going to close this hospital, they're going to close the palliative care centre and they are going to do a consultation on this in January. The decision's already been made. It is an outrage. So I favour – I think that government has a responsibility to get genuine consultation going and then the public have a responsibility to participate. But there will be some decisions which are not appropriate for consultation. Sometimes decisions have to be, conflicting priorities have to be married and in the end people are elected to make decisions, so that's the fine balance there as well.

FERDINAND MOUNT

Could I interrupt? Doesn't this affect the idea of a referendum, because after all in a way this is a

MARGOT: A very good point. I'm completely in favour of referendums of some sort. I'm very pleased to hear from you, Ferdinand that the Conference voted for it today. I think it's an excellent idea and I think it could be married up perhaps with MPs as well. Perhaps the whole referendum thing could be a combination of the public, a certain proportion thereof and MPs, and this would restore some powers for parliament as well. But no doubt you have as many comments to make following your whole investigation of these and many other issues.

FERDINAND MOUNT

I think the case for local referendums is just as strong as the case for national referendums and in fact all over northern Europe, less so in southern Europe where of course Italy already has a well developed referendum system, all over northern Europe and Scandinavian countries and German ..and so on, they all have some kind of local provision – provision for local referendum. They're not used very often,

they're a safety valve. When enough people feel that something has gone seriously wrong, perhaps because all the parties are agreed on something, then this offers an opportunity for the people to have a say. And I can't see – and I've absolutely no worries about that at all. A lot of people in Westminster village fear this is going to be some terrible undermining of representative government, I think it's a reinforcement to representative government and I'm all in favour of it. And just to try and answer – well, there can't be an answer, we can only speculate on what happens at the next election. I would have thought, taking just as cynical a view of the Lib Dems as Margot, but coming to the opposite conclusion, which is that they were burnt last time that they entered into a pact and got nothing out of it in terms of electoral reform. I don't think they'll go to a pact without a clear pledge, not just a pledge of the Speakers convention or another Jenkins style report, a clear pledge to move to action. And if the Tories won't give it them I think they would be quite shameless in going in with Labour because they would, however badly Labour's done, let's say Labour's got 32%, Lib Dems 21, they still could say we represent the majority of the people. I mean not a very good argument because it would be Labour disgraced and humiliated, but I can well see them doing that. So I think the hung parliament will precipitate something, I'm not necessarily saying that the outcome as a result of it, but I think it will, if you get a result of the form 39% Conservative, 33% Labour, 21 Lib Dems, which would – and the Conservatives still wouldn't have an overall majority, I think we should all begin furious to think, not sure what conclusions we'll come to, but I think that will make the existing system seem outrageous. As it hasn't yet seemed outrageous. It's seemed unfair, unfair to Tories now, unfair to Lib Dems in the past, and of course we had our golden period when the system favoured us and we weren't too fussed about it then. But if there's a really outrageous result I think things might happen.

Isn't it a simple fact though that we didn't win the seats in the urban areas and that's where the majority of the votes are? I mean Labour isn't bothered at the moment about the .. vote.

KEN RITCHIE

I hope that there will be an opportunity afterwards for continuing this sort of discussion because we could go on for a long time and time has run out. Can I say from the point of the Electoral Reform Society that we won't be hugely aggrieved if we find that there is a situation after the next election in which the outcome has got to be at least a referendum to let the electorate decide the voting system. It would be so much nicer, however, if we actually moved to this what we see as a promised land with a new electoral system, because the major parties do actually embrace it and decide that this is the thing that needs to be done and to strengthen democracy. So there are interesting times ahead. We have never in the Electoral Reform Society taken the view that simply by changing the electoral system everything else is quickly going to fall into place. Clearly it's not. All the issues that have been raised this evening, that have been raised by the Power Commission, these are all these issues that need to remain on the agenda and I'm sure that the debates will continue. I'm very, very grateful to you both for your contributions. The agenda that you have covered could have occupied an entire conference and I think the quality of your presentations deserved a conference type audience, rather than this more select gathering, but thank you very much indeed nevertheless. Thank you.