

Are we going to wake up one day and regret not changing the voting system?

A selection of speeches and contributions from the Make Votes Count fringe meeting, at the Labour Party Conference 2006.



www.makemyvotecount.org.uk

In association with:

Electoral
 Reform
 Society



**Labour campaign
for electoral reform**

Published by Make Votes Count, January 2007

Printed by Conquest Litho Ltd.

Make Votes Count is the campaign for a more representative voting system; based on the principles of a modern democracy, greater voter choice, fairness and better government.

Make Votes Count is supported by: Charter88, Christian Socialist Movement, Conservative Action for Electoral Reform, Electoral Reform Society, Fawcett Society, Green Party, Liberal Democrats, Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform, New Politics Network, Plaid Cymru and X-Change. MVC also has over ten thousand individual supporters. To register your support for the campaign, sign up online at www.makemyvotecount.org.uk

Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform is a network of Labour Party members and supporters who campaign for democratic reform to move up the Party's agenda and for change in our voting system. Membership costs £10 / £5 per year. You can join by completing the form available on the LCER website www.electoralreform.org.uk or by contacting LCER at lcerinfo@yahoo.uk

Electoral Reform Society is a membership organisation which campaigns for improvements in our democracy, particularly through the use of better voting systems. www.electoral-reform.org.uk

The views contained in this pamphlet are those of the individual contributors and not necessarily shared by Make Votes Count.

If you would like to respond to any of the contributions, explore the arguments further, or join in the debate, please get in touch or log on to

www.makemyvotecount.org.uk

Make Votes Count
6 Chancel Street
London SE1 0UU
Tel: 020 7928 2076
malcolm@makevotescount.org.uk

Make Votes Count hosted a public fringe meeting / rally at the Labour Party Conference 2006. The event took place on Sunday 24 September 2006, at the Manchester Art Gallery. The meeting - entitled "Are we going to wake up one day and regret not changing the voting system?" was hosted jointly with the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform and the Electoral Reform Society. Anne Campbell, former Labour MP for Cambridge 1992-2005, outgoing LCER Chair and a Director of Make Votes Count, chaired.

SPEAKERS

Rt Hon Charles Clarke - Labour MP for Norwich South

Rt Hon Patricia Hewitt - Labour MP for Leicester West and Secretary of State for the Department of Health

Dr Adrian Blau - Hallsworth Research Fellow at the University of Manchester

Michael Meacher - Labour MP for Oldham West and Royton

John Denham - Labour MP for Southampton Itchen, Chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee, Co-Chair of Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform

MESSAGE FROM THE EVENT CHAIR, ANNE CAMPBELL

Electoral reform resonates with many of the topics discussed at Labour's Conference, including party reform, how to reconnect with the electorate and the rise of the BNP in some areas. Deputy leadership contenders have already featured pledges on changing the voting system as part of their initial pitches. It is a healthy sign that the party is waking up to the need to debate the issue openly, honestly, and with urgency.

In the run up to Conference, we heard quite a bit about hung parliaments. I would like to see a Labour government elected with more than 50% of the vote and with a Commons majority. That's my preferred position. But I would rather see a hung parliament than a Tory majority. Because of our current electoral system, anything between Tory level pegging with Labour and a Tory lead of 11%, will potentially produce a hung parliament. This is something that we need to prepare for if we are to face in the future.

My message to you is please continue to fly the flag for electoral reform. Talk to your constituency parties and to other organisations you are involved in. Make sure that people know the arguments, because so often we find that when people know the arguments they become converted. And then the challenge to us is to put the arguments in a sufficiently accessible form that engages people and attracts their interest. I hope you find the speeches and contributions reproduced here do just that.

CHARLES CLARKE

Since 1997 we as a party in government have made major progress on constitutional reform. But we need a reassessment of where we are, what we've achieved, what we still have to achieve, going right across the whole range. But of course the central ambition has to be to make votes count, to make elected politics count, at all levels of government.

First, it seems to me absolutely critical that we address the fundamental problem that the balance between local government and national government is not as clear as it needs to be. There is a whole set of conflicting issues which arise, including around the funding system for local government, which make it very difficult for individual citizens to know what they are voting for. Second, we ought to revitalise the move towards unitary local government in every part of the country. The unitary local authority has real advantages in trying to make sure that the state can operate in a coherent way and people know how it operates. There's a strong case for proportional representation in local government. It's not straightforward. Single transferable voting in three to four seat wards is a controversial issue. There are also big issues about frequency of elections and how they operate. But I believe that it would develop a more stable approach in local government and strengthen local government more widely.

In Scotland, devolution is widely recognised to have made a significant and positive difference. Our approach should be to consolidate and develop the strength of the Scottish Parliament. The government's review of electoral systems will be important in this context, as there have been tensions in Scotland because of the way the electoral system has worked, and tensions between members of the Scottish parliament and members of the UK parliament as to how things operate. In Wales, the devolution issues have again been strong but fortunately, in my opinion, we have passed further legislation just recently to ensure that we have flexibility for developing devolution to Wales over the coming period.

In London, the situation is much less clear. You have a very large number of bodies working in different ways. You get bodies discussing strategy on the same subjects, all with different mandates and different authorities in a way which again makes it difficult for the citizen to see exactly where they stand. There have been changes recently which I welcome, giving more power to the Greater London Assembly and to the Mayor, but actually there's a set of issues there which need to be really thought through to complete that reform.

With the English regions, we need a complete rethink. I don't think it's possible to establish regional assemblies without some democratic accountability for it. But it leaves us with a situation where the government is increasing the effort to devolve to the regional level, but without a significant countervailing democratic force. That's a very real issue. We need to increase regional accountability, by looking at organising all central government functions in the regions to respect regional boundaries and to increase the co-ordination responsibilities between health, police, arts and culture, economic regeneration and so on, at the regional level. There is also a case for experimenting with English regional grand committees and establishing select committees for each of the regions.

I believe that the impact of the changes we've made in the House of Lords has been far more significant in terms of the practice of politics than is widely understood. The fact that we now have a more active House of Lords, which the government is a very long way from controlling, is a development that many would see as positive. The reforms have to be completed and it's a process in which Jack Straw is engaged. Personally, I think we should maintain the explicit revising role of the chamber. I'm in favour of achieving a wholly elected second chamber over a fairly lengthy period of transition. That can be achieved in a way that makes the election of the second chamber dependent on the election of the first chamber, rather than as a completely independent area. And it is in those elections where I think the campaign of Make Votes Count in terms of some form of proportional structure is very important and entirely feasible.

On the Commons, I think increasing the role of select committees in relation to key appointments of people, rather along the lines of American confirmation hearings, is a very positive thing to do. And there needs to be greater scrutiny and deliberation on European Union matters within the House of Commons - a weakness in current arrangements.

As far as voting reform in the Commons is concerned, I've always argued for the alternative vote in single member seats, because I believe the constituency basis is absolutely critical. I don't personally favour lists systems in the Commons. We should be considering reducing the voting age to 16 and, as is in fact happening, reforming the register in a way that we shall get greater participation.

Any sign, on our part, of faltering in our determination to reform the constitutional structure of this country and to promote engagement of citizens will be seized upon by our political opponents. At each level - local government, the nations and the regions, the UK parliament, Europe - we have to take this moment to go still further forward.

PATRICIA HEWITT

There is a much wider issue of which constitutional reform is part, which is about how we reconnect people with our parliamentary democracy. Or perhaps, more accurately, how we re-connect parliamentary democracy and party politics with the great mass of people.

Now voting reform, in my view, is an essential part of that, but no way is it the whole of it. I have always felt, but I guess perhaps more so since I became a Member of Parliament, very strongly about the constituency link that we have within the House of Commons. I think it is enormously important if we take seriously this relationship between political parties and those who elected us to office. I also think that it is one of the great strengths of the British Constitution, unlike many on the continent, that the great majority of ministers are also constituency members of parliament. Every week, whatever else we may be dealing with in government or in parliament, we are back in our constituencies, feet on the ground, really knowing how the policies we're making, the laws we're passing are working or not working in practice, in people's own lives. And I would not in a programme of electoral reform for the Commons want to see that constituency link lost.

There are various ways of dealing with that. The alternative vote system - which I know is not pure PR - does have the advantage of giving in most scenarios a much greater relationship between votes and results. It also means that every Member of Parliament elected within a constituency does actually, after the redistribution of votes, have the support of more than half the electors. That's one way into it. Another way is to use a top up system in order to get more proportionality into the overall result, but with the disadvantage that you create two different classes of members of parliament. For me the principle is rather more important than the precise details of different voting systems. The principle of making everybody's vote count, as equally as we can, seems to me essential if we are going to reconnect our democracy with people.

Part of this programme is moving towards an elected House of Lords. I'm not naïve enough to think that electing most or all members of the second chamber will cure the disconnection between people and parliament, but I certainly believe that a wholly appointed House of Lords will just deepen the disconnect. And therefore I will continue very strongly to support proposals for a majority and preferably a hundred percent elected members of a second chamber.

As a very long-standing member of the Labour Party, long time activist, as well as an MP and minister, I was of course delighted that we won the last election. But none of us can be comfortable with the fact that we won it on such a small turnout and therefore such a small proportion of the total potential popular vote. And what I see is a real disconnect between what I call 'small p' politics and 'big P' politics. And for me the 'small p' politics is what I see every day of the week in my own constituency in Leicester and all around the country: people who are actively involved in their own community. It may be in a tenants and residents association, in a faith group, some other voluntary organisation, getting involved in a regeneration programme that certainly is helping to transform lives in some of our most disadvantaged communities.

There are a whole range of ways in which people are actively engaged in shaping collective decisions and collective opportunities for themselves and their fellow citizens. And yet so many of those people will say, 'well, of course I don't really know anything about politics.' Or, 'I'm not really interested in politics,' or even, 'well, I don't really vote.' And yet what they're doing, like all of those people who are involved in the great new mass movements of our time, is all about politics and political decisions of one kind and another. And the responsibility is on us, and particularly I think all of us in progressive politics, to reconnect party and parliamentary institutions which so often seem to have nothing whatsoever to do with people's own lives and their own engagement in these issues. Particularly, but not only, a younger generation. And for me that is about changing the way we do politics, changing the way we do government.

When I became Health Secretary I was absolutely determined to involve people in a much more active and real way than traditional consultation processes. And we created last year - in *Our Health, Our Care, Our Say* - the biggest piece of deliberative democracy that I think we've ever had in Britain. We had groups of people around the country, not chosen because they were active in pressure groups or even because they worked in the NHS or social care, but chosen at random from local people, discussing the issues that are confronting the health service. And it culminated in a thousand strong citizen summit. That kind of direct democracy, whether it's face-to-face or increasingly on the internet, can't, at the moment anyway, replace representative democracy, but it needs to be part of how we work as a government and how we re-engage people with representative democracy.

ADRIAN BLAU

I'm going to raise four points. The first is that hung parliaments are now quite likely sooner or later. The second is that under a hung parliament it's fairly easy to see how an electoral reform process might start. Third, it's less easy to see how that process might get onto the statute books, there are so many obstacles in the path of reform. And fourth, that pre-emptive action may thus be needed.

So let's start with the probability of a hung parliament. This is quite high as at the moment we have one in seven seats being won by minor parties. That leads to a wide range of election results that could end in a hung parliament. Even if it doesn't next time, we're quite likely to see one sooner or later unless the number of minor party MPs falls dramatically.

In a hung parliament situation it's fairly clear to see how the Liberal Democrats, if they were holding the balance of power, could get the electoral reform process started. Equally Labour, if they were in a position to have a Commons majority along with the Liberal Democrats, might be willing to set up a Royal Commission, a referendum or a citizens' assembly. Now this doesn't mean the Labour leadership would have to be convinced of the need for PR, it may simply be just to gain time; perhaps until they were able to call a new election in more propitious circumstances. For an electoral reform process could easily take several years, depending on what stages it had to pass through.

So the next question is would it be in Labour's interests to go ahead with PR? I'm not a supporter of any party, and am agnostic on electoral reform. I think Labour advocates of PR should be quite careful and weigh up the pros and cons. And I can clearly see how a Labour leadership might think that the risks were too great. For example there are some PR systems which would let new parties come along who might take core voters away from Labour.

Also let's remember the seat advantages that Labour currently gets from first past the post. First, the winner's bonus which exaggerates a lead in votes into a larger lead in seats. Second, the under-representation of minor parties which gives both of the major parties a boost. And third, the bias which Labour has over the Conservatives at the moment, which would be unlikely to disappear completely in the event of a Conservative recovery. So it would be risky for Labour to push for PR. It's mostly likely to do so, I suspect, if you had a new Labour prime minister elected who could see support slipping away and wanting to hold onto power.

Even if the Labour leadership does agree that PR is in Labour's interests, could it get through the House of Commons? The mathematics are quite tricky. Let's assume that you have about 85 minor party MPs who vote for reform, then that would require 240 Labour MPs to do likewise to get it through - two-thirds of the current Party. Now very roughly it appears that about a third of the current Labour Party are in favour of reform, about a third are against and about a third are don't know or won't say. So you need to get all of those in favour and all of the don't knows to vote for reform in that situation. If Labour lost thirty MPs, which would produce a hung parliament, you'd need to get three quarters of the remaining Labour MPs to vote if you're going to pass an electoral reform Bill. And if Labour lost ninety MPs, so that it could just scrape a majority with the Liberal Democrats, you'd need 90% of the remaining Labour MPs to vote for reform. So the more Labour needs electoral reform, the harder it would be to get it through the Commons because the more die-hard opponents of reform there would be.

And that means that Labour leadership would need to find some way of getting reform past a recalcitrant Labour Party. One way of doing this is with a referendum process, which would in effect bind the hands of Labour MPs. Of course there is the possibility that there might not be support for PR in a referendum. A second option would be to put PR as a manifesto commitment. The problem with that is if you have a hung parliament, Labour MPs who are opposed to reform could say: "well, we weren't elected on this manifesto as a majority government so we don't feel bound to it".

So I suspect that the way to get PR through a House of Commons is not to wait until a hung parliament, but to start now. Perhaps a new Labour prime minister could announce virtually on day one that he or she will be going ahead with a referendum on, let's say, not just electoral reform but also House of Lords reform and devolving power to local government - to which citizens could only vote yes or no to the whole thing. That might stack the decks in favour, because there's probably more support in the country for those other measures than there is for electoral reform. And it might also outflank the Conservatives. It would be a risky thing to do, but it would at least be presenting this from a position of strength. As Neil Kinnock argues, it's harder for Labour politicians to argue for PR in opposition. I suspect it would also be difficult for Labour politicians to argue for PR if they were doing fairly badly in the opinion polls and looking as if they were in a position of weakness. That is why you must consider changing the voting system now, and push forward with it in the next six months to a year.

MICHAEL MEACHER

I am someone who has, until hitherto, rested content with first past the post. But I am now cautiously thinking that we have got to make a change.

The inherent inequity of first past the post has now reached a point where it is intellectually and politically unsustainable. It produces results out of all proportion to the verdict of the electorate, leading to volatility between governments succeeding each other with enormous majorities. Of course, it's great when you're on the winning side. But we should remember what actually happened in 1983, when we were on the receiving end. Is that the sort of situation which, clinging to an existing system because it may in the recent past have been helpful to us, we're prepared to contemplate again? It is wrong and cannot be democratically justified. First past the post also concentrates attention almost exclusively on a tiny number of seats. It is probably less than 5% and the intensity of effort that goes into that 5% has been increasing. It is not in any sense a true reflection of public opinion. It does not provide an acceptable mandate for the winning party's programme.

Another point I want to make is wasted votes. And I don't mean just the huge majorities that are piled up by us in the north and it used to be the Tories in the south. It is also the case that the number of seats where the winning MP does not get a majority of people in support of that person is also going up. I think that it is rather uncomfortable to know that you actually do not command the support of a majority of your constituents. Frankly, those votes could be much better used to reflect different and important shades of opinion. Britain is far more pluralistic today than is reflected in two overwhelmingly dominant relatively monolithic political blocks. Voters get just one vote every four or five years, which means that the depth, the range, the variation of opinion in the country is very poorly reflected in the political process.

Accountability of power in our system today has all but collapsed. The checks and balances have all but disappeared. We have a single, virtually unchallenged, line of command from the top downwards enforced by the whips, with their customary subtlety and their combination of intimidation and patronage. And a very considerable variation that does exist in opinions within the parliamentary party, and of course in the electorate, is simply swept aside as we have shifted further and further towards quasi-presidential rule. This worrying trend didn't start with us, but I think it has gone further today.

The main way of tackling a loss of democracy of the kind that I indicate is by major strategic reforms in the political process, in order to restore parliamentary sovereignty and to change the balance of power between parliament and executive. If the resulting constitutional settlement is to provide greater accountability and afford a greater variation of views to be better represented, then I have come to the reluctant conclusion that some form of proportionality may well be needed.

The question is, and I don't want to dodge this, what form that is going to take. First past the post has very substantial drawbacks, but so do PR systems. They disproportionately benefit smaller parties and can give those parties an undeserved stranglehold on power. PR can lead to cobbled up coalitions after the election, which the electorate probably would never have voted for. PR can also break the very important constituency-MP connection. So we have to be careful about which system we choose. But we already have variations of one kind or another for the European, the Scottish and the Welsh elections. And I think it is fair to say that they have results which are more democratic and more representative than we have for the Commons. And for that alone, given the intellectual rationale I've tried to give, we should once again address this issue.

I deeply regret that we did not have a referendum at a time when we could have done after 1997. An additional member system is a very good compromise. There is still the constituency MP connection, it is not overly complex, it is much more proportional and it gives access to smaller parties but without giving them undue influence. The one caveat is that the ordering of the list should be determined by party voting and not by the leadership. I think we need a major debate on this with the possibility, I would strongly support, of a referendum at the end of it. There was nothing wrong with the Jenkins Committee; the problem was it was the Prime Minister who took the decision not to proceed. It shouldn't have depended on him. When you're talking about the rights of the electorate to the kind of voting system they have, they should be the ones who in the end take the decision. So I think that this should be a commitment again for the next Labour government - which is not going to have to wait for the next election, we are going to have it within a year - and I hope that this is high on its list of priorities.

JOHN DENHAM

The key is how do we convince other Labour Party members that electoral reform is actually in the interest of our politics and our party, because if we can't do that we will never get there. It is true that some of our colleagues have minds which are utterly closed to the whole concept; on the basis that they can't see anything wrong with an electoral system that produces large majorities and which every now and again gives us a chance to play with the train set. A far larger group of colleagues live in a world of cerebral duality in which part of their brain knows that from a democratic point of view it is indefensible, and the other part says, "yes, but from time to time we get to run with the train set, so let's stick with first past the post".

The position we are in at the moment tells us that to stick with first past the post is undoubtedly bad for democracy and for expressing the pluralism that exists. It's also a very bad thing for the Labour Party. That is because first past the post - at a time when you've been in power for a long time and some of the initial appeal may be rubbing off - has a negative effect for us. Our party is retreating from large areas of the country where for the past twenty years we have either been growing in strength or we have been strong. Out of 360 local authorities in England there are now 70 that have no Labour councillors whatsoever. In those areas there will probably be some stalwart members keeping the flag flying but it will be hard to run an effective Labour Party that is offering leadership in the local community. We are already in a situation where some of our colleagues who lost their seats only at the last election are being told that they will not get support from the Labour Party to fight in the next election, because theirs is not regarded as a winnable seat. A political party that begins to retreat from large parts of the country in its organisation, its membership and its politics will lose the ability to represent large parts of the country and large parts of the people in it; as the Tories found out in the 1980s and are still struggling to overcome.

An inevitable consequence of this is that you end up concentrating your resources in those seats that you can win, and within those seats on a smaller and smaller group of votes - those seen as the key swing voters in marginal seats. In practice it comes down to a few tens of thousands of people. And the price you pay for that is not just in terms of our party's organisation, presence and representation, but in terms of our political aspirations and our ability to pursue a progressive politics. Much of the politics that we built in the 90s - reaching out to a broad coalition of British people and saying here is a vision of a society in which we can all do better -

that gradually goes out of the window as well. And so the longer we continue with our commitment to first past the post, the narrower our party will become as a political organisation and the narrower the politics we feel able to fight an election campaign on.

Whilst we should be immensely proud of what this government has achieved in so many areas, we are still going to need to find ways of indicating to the public that the future is not simply a repeat of the past. And I can't think of a bigger symbolic policy change to demonstrate our commitment to build on what we've done but to be different in the future than to indicate our openness to changing the voting system in this country. And it absolutely fits in with everything that's been said from all parts of the party about decentralisation of power and changing the way we use power.

There are problems with electoral reform, including dealing with the Liberal Democrats. However, what their vote shows is that there is a natural vote for a broadly left of centre approach to politics - the values people hold, the basic ways they want to see society run - which is bigger than the Labour Party has on its own achieved at any time for many, many years. And the reality is we've got a better chance of achieving that vision with a reformed electoral system, working with and learning to co-operate with other parties and other political cultures, than in believing we can express it as one party on our own. But we are also at a moment where the natural tendencies of people in political parties to want to win power, to have a go at the running the train set, is actually taking the Liberal Democrats in the other direction. And that's a real danger, that their desire for power will actually persuade them to want to work with a different electoral block. So we need to act now for the chance of securing progressive politics in this country.

The debate about systems does need to take place, although to me the strategic concerns come first. I'm proud to be a constituency MP. I believe that there are ways of squaring the balance between greater proportionality and individual member systems without necessarily having AV; which does have a disadvantage to Labour of magnifying any swing against us. I am keener at the moment that we open this discussion in our party, that we make it part of refreshing our own politics. And that we say any voting system which means our party does not bother to exist, be organised or fight elections with credibility in every single council seat on every single council in every single constituency in this country is not the right sort of voting system for the Labour Party.

OVERCOMING POTENTIAL OBSTACLES TO REFORM:

Charles Clarke: People underestimate very substantially the difficulty in getting political consensus for any particular reform. There is the additional fire in this case that you've got the individual futures of those politicians on the line by the outcome that happens. Royal Commissions and the rest of it are I think a complete waste of space and simply a delaying mechanism. What there has to be is an agreement between the political parties at their leadership level. There are various devices which are talked about, like Speakers Conferences, but anything which has a committee of experts, even senior Privy Counsellors, which does not bind the top leadership of the parties will not happen and that's the bottom line.

Ken Ritchie (Electoral Reform Society): When the bill for STV for local government went through the Scottish parliament, there were a tiny number of dissident Labour MSPs that voted against. Most realised that it was a deal which was necessary to preserve a coalition and voted accordingly. If we are in a hung parliament territory then Labour's position as a minority government will be that you sign up to it, or the government falls. And that would certainly focus minds in the Commons. But the Liberal Democrats, if they find themselves having that sort of leverage, are not going to settle for the Alternative Vote but are going to demand more. However, Labour might gamble instead on facing a new set of elections, which the party could blame on the intransigence of the Liberal Democrats. The risk is that the Liberal Democrats could equally present Labour as having refused to give people a more democratic system.

Adrian Blau: It will certainly be important how much leverage the Liberal Democrats would have in a hung parliament scenario. If they could only form a coalition with Labour it would be easier for Labour to play hardball with them and actually say no to some of their requirements for electoral reform. If the Liberal Democrats could plausibly form a coalition with the Conservatives as well, it gives them much greater bargaining power and it weakens Labour's position. Incidentally, it was not quite the same in Scotland, because in Scotland the MPs weren't losing their seats. They were turkeys voting for somebody else's Christmas.

Charles Clarke: The people of this country would be exceptionally cynical if there was some fix put together among parliamentarians as a result of a hung parliament. You are going to be on much stronger ground if you've got a set of reforms that you propose beforehand, and set in the context of the wider constitutional reform agenda.

THE PROCESS AHEAD TO ACHIEVE REFORM:

Patricia Hewitt: At the point where we really want to move on electoral reform, the way to do it is through a citizens assembly; some sort of deliberative process where you engage the public on a representative basis, where you can put out the arguments and give the public a chance to quiz the experts. You could use this process if not to agree one preferred way forward, then to define several options and then that's what you take to a referendum. I think that would be the right way to do it. And the very process of doing that would actually help achieve this larger goal of making parliamentary democracy a great deal more relevant to people who at the moment are reluctant voters, or not voting at all.

Adrian Blau: There's no doubt that during the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly, the citizens' were able to get on top of the technicalities of electoral systems very effectively. Although politicians need to be aware that if they give the power to a citizens' assembly what comes out might not be what the politicians would want, as indeed happened in British Columbia.

Michael Meacher: Whatever deliberative-type method you use to make people more aware of the arguments and the pros and cons I believe is helpful. But in the end this has got to be decided by people themselves as to how they actually want their voting system today. If one had a referendum - particularly if there was a considerable period of discussion and reflection, which has genuinely raised public awareness - I would expect that decision to last. I don't think we can say that it would be impossible to change.

John Denham: Once a major party has committed itself to electoral reform the process will become unstoppable. Now whether that leads immediately to what becomes the settled form will depend in large part on the process that you then work through. You can't be certain, but I think the sort of inclusive process that people talk about gives us the best chance of achieving that.

THE NEXT STEP WITHIN LABOUR:

Patricia Hewitt: It is about making and winning the argument inside the Labour Party, because this argument is most of all important to progressives.

John Denham: We have entered a period of real debate about the direction of the Labour Party. It is crucial that we get electoral reform into that debate; and make the argument that electoral reform is good for the party.

Are we going to wake up one day and regret not changing the voting system?

That was the question Make Votes Count posed to the Labour Party at their Conference in September 2006. This pamphlet brings together the speeches and contributions made by Charles Clarke, Patricia Hewitt, Adrian Blau, Michael Meacher and John Denham to our fringe rally on the subject.

For Labour, as for all parties, concentrating on swing voters affects policy, messaging and political priorities. It shifts the centre vote towards the right, neglecting issues which Labour traditionally championed and leaving a vacuum which extremists like the BNP can exploit. The focus on marginals has a negative effect on constituencies and wards not 'in play': demoralising local campaigning effort and diminishing party activity. It is in both the party's and the country's interest to consider voting reform.

Along with other measures, electoral reform would help tackle disengagement and reluctance to vote amongst sections of the electorate. It would renew trust, particularly with those who voted Labour in 1997; when the party offered 'to let the people decide' their own voting system in a referendum.

But time is running out to recognise the importance of voting reform to a progressive approach to politics in Britain. As Neil Kinnock found, it is impossible to be honest about your support for changing the voting system when in opposition, let alone do anything about it unless you are in government. Labour party members must look more seriously at electoral reform and press the party leadership to do likewise before it is too late.

To explore the arguments or join in the debate, please get in touch or log on to www.makemyvotecount.org.uk



Make Votes Count is the campaign for a more representative voting system; based on the principles of a modern democracy, greater voter choice, fairness and better government.