



6 Chancel Street, London SE1 0UU
020 7928 2076
malcolm@makevotescount.org.uk
www.makemyvotecount.org.uk

Make Votes Count Campaign Update: January 2007

featuring Make Votes Count in Labour Briefing

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

The Tide is Turning

1) If it is good enough for them ...

In an unprecedented move, when MPs vote on the composition of the House of Lords shortly, they will rate the different options in order of preference so that one proposal eventually enjoys majority support after second preferences have been redistributed. So if MPs now think that simple first-past-the-post is no longer suited to their needs, are they finally going to see that FPTP is just as ill-suited to the needs of the country and the electorate?

2) And increasing numbers within Labour ...

No longer can it be seen as just a few isolated individuals within the party calling for change. It seems that all the leading candidates or possible candidates for the position of deputy leader of the Labour party support either the Alternative Vote or some form of proportional representation, or at the very least express real doubts about the present system.

3) And has a base of public support ...

An ICM poll for the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust in Oct 2006 shows the public is strongly in favour of getting rid of the current way of electing MPs and replacing it with a more representative system. Of those questioned, five support reform for every one opposed.

→ Then we have to make the most of this new situation and build on it. We have the arguments (summarised eloquently in the speeches to our Conference 2006 fringe - see separate pamphlet), we just need to sell them. So let's continue to recruit new supporters; attend events and raise electoral reform whenever we get the opportunity.

Democracy should not be desk-bound

The political path to electoral reform - whether through policy adoption, expediency, negotiations arising from a hung parliament or some other scenario - is not clear. So we cannot sit back hoping for a result that may or may not happen, or rely on political machinations that may or may not bring changes to the voting system.

We need to bear in mind that how the decision is made is as important for our democracy as the change itself. A range of politicians and pressure groups now seem to be exploring the process of delivering reform. It could be via a citizens' assembly (as trialled by the Canadian Province of British Columbia), locally-initiated referendums (as proposed by David Chaytor MP in a Bill last year) or some other mechanism.

What we do not want is a repeat of the way the closed list system was adopted for electing MEPs. Particularly the way parties used the system to promote certain candidates undermined public confidence in those elections, and resulted in a system which denies voters choice of candidates. The public needs to have faith in the system chosen. Any process needs to go beyond the government's review of the experience of different electoral systems in the UK and its "desk-based" research. Clearly more importance should have been attached to seeking the views and active involvement of the public. Democracy cannot be desk-bound.

As Peter Hain said in a fringe at Conference: "we should not hand down policies such as this from on high. The type of electoral reform we support should be a product of real debate in the party and in the country."

MVC Announces New Chair

Chris Huhne has formally taken over as chair of Make Votes Count. Chris has been involved in the campaign for many years, writing pamphlets on the business case for electoral reform and promoting the issue in many forums. Chris is Liberal Democrat MP for Eastleigh and the party's shadow environment spokesperson. Prior to entering the Commons in 2005, he was an MEP and before that a successful financial journalist and economist.

David Lipsey stepped down in September after seven years of outstanding service to, and leadership, of the campaign. As Anne Campbell eloquently stated in her opening remarks at the MVC fringe at Labour Conference last September:

"David Lipsey has done quite a remarkable job in keeping the torch burning for electoral reform, and also organising some extremely high profile meetings and discussions, both within parliament and without. I think we've got a great deal to thank David for. We owe him a very deep debt of gratitude for doing so well for electoral reform for so long."

We are also grateful to **Martin Linton**, who has stepped down from MVC's Management Committee and has contributed much over the years. **Greg Power**, who was an advisor to Robin Cook, has joined the Management Committee. Additional Labour appointments will be announced in the coming months.

MVC Office News

Special mention and thanks to **Clare Jones** and **Paul Davies** who have now gone on to different challenges. Clare interned at MVC for much of 2006 and was instrumental in co-ordinating the Democracy Groups Reception at the Labour Party Conference. Paul Davies recently finished his job with Electoral Reform Society, which involved blogging for MVC. **Steve Skelton** is our new intern and blogger. As ever, thanks to **Christine Wright** for maintaining the supporter database, **Paul Oldham** for being our website guru and **Denise Cox** for her accounts and book-keeping work.

MVC's New Campaign Thrust

Make Votes Count has a new campaigning thrust, aimed at generating wider interest in voting reform outside of Westminster and the political parties. It is part of push to define ourselves as much by what the political situation is now - in 2007 - rather than just when the campaign and the organisation really came together almost a decade ago. As part of this we have updated our campaign strapline - see the front page header.

One of the new angles we will be exploring over the coming months is the idea that electoral reform would help **'Shake up Politics'** by:

- Making politicians more accountable
- Making political parties take you more seriously and fight for your vote
- Giving you greater choice at the ballot box
- Making your vote really count at elections
- Modernising our democracy

Things we learnt in 2006

1) FPTP doesn't prevent extremist parties from gaining seats - in fact the opposite. The BNP gained 12 council seats in Barking and Dagenham, despite polling less than the Conservatives, who only managed 1 councillor.

2) Tactical voting takes place against incumbency not only in government but also at council level.

3) Any general election result between Conservative level pegging with Labour and a Tory lead of 10% (after boundary changes) potentially produces a hung parliament.

Make Votes Count in Labour Briefing

Peter Hain, Charles Clarke, Jon Cruddas, Alan Milburn, Jack Straw, Billy Hayes. All have spoken about electoral reform during the past six months. MVC welcomes these people into the debate. It is noticeable how fewer and fewer people are prepared to come out publicly in defence of FPTP ... and that can only be a good thing.



The 646 seat strategy

If Labour is serious about putting genuine power in people's hands, the party's celebration of the electoral significance of the 48 super-marginals (the seats where Labour's majority is 2.5% or less, or where it is in second place 3% or less behind the incumbent) seems odd. Yes, under the current electoral system, those seats and the support of swing voters there are vital to achieving a fourth election victory for Labour. But at what cost? Can, for example, the needs of those living in social housing be fairly weighted with those of homeowners when it is that latter group whom the party is specifically seeking to win over? When the crunch time comes, it takes a brave politician to go against the logic of first-past-the-post. Equally, with only a finite amount of money to spend on campaigning, choices have to be made about where to target resources. And the losers again are likely to be those which matter less for electoral victory. The result is to diminish the party and the political sphere at a local level and heighten disengagement. Democrats - within Labour and beyond - must demand a system that delivers 646 marginal constituencies, rather than just those 48.

MVC Challenges to the Labour Party

Over the past year, a number of questions have been posed to Labour - at fringe events and by Make Votes Count itself. The aim is to stimulate debate within the party. So ...

1. "How it is that Labour - a party that is for fairness and social justice and equality - can be committed to defending a system that is so patently unfair? There is a fundamental injustice that if you are a Labour supporter half way up the Welsh valleys, your vote does not count as much as a Labour supporter in a Middle England marginal seat."
2. "Labour needs to ask themselves: 'how low [a share of the vote] can we go?' ... 'how low are we prepared to go ... and still consider ourselves as having a legitimate mandate and support for majority control?'"
3. "Is this the only type of Labour government we can get under this system?"
4. "Are we going to wake up one day and regret not changing the voting system?"

The Alternative Vote Challenge

The Alternative Vote fulfils one of the main Jenkins Commission criteria: that of increased voter choice at local level. And it does ensure winners gain more than 50% of votes cast. But AV is not a proportional system. We need to continue arguing for the democratic space for other systems to be considered and to ensure that the whole process gains legitimacy.

The Hung Parliament Challenge

Many recent elections across the western world have seen the two main parties / blocs fairly evenly split, with few votes separating them. In the UK, Labour's 66-seat general election majority could have been wiped out completely if a total of 15,000 people in the most marginal seats had voted differently. Are we prepared to have a more open and honest debate here about electoral systems; especially if we have another close election next time? A pre-emptive move towards electoral reform is better than bringing it in as a political fix, whether for obvious party advantage or in a hung parliament situation.

TAKE ACTION

Taking the campaign forward

1) We have to take the arguments to the Labour party and within government

- organise a speaker for a party meeting or a policy forum
- send the report from the meeting to the Policy Commission for Crime Justice Citizenship and Equalities. Or write an individual submission.
- Write to your local MPs, MEPs, councillors and National Policy Forum regional and constituency representatives. Give your own views on electoral reform and ask them for theirs.

2) We have to make use of new opportunities as they arise

Lords reform, party funding, the West Lothian / English Question and other constitutional reform debates. Also: Scottish STV local elections, Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliamentary elections, Labour regional meetings (see back of LCER newsletter for full event listing).

3) We must connect with the many people around the country who feel their votes don't count and their voices are not being listened to

- host a debate or education session on electoral reform with a local community group or at a community event
- distribute literature on voting reform
- sign up supporters on a campaign stall



- write letters to your local newspaper
- blog or podcast for reform
- recommend our website and blog www.makemyvotecount.org.uk - which is updated almost daily to highlight the dynamic nature of the campaign.

Make Votes Count and LCER can offer campaign advice and supply materials to help you engage and involve others. We may also be able to provide a speaker or suggest possible people for you to ask. An outline talk/speaker notes and audience quiz are now available from the MVC office.

Supporter Communications

Are you receiving MVC's email updates and monthly news bulletins? Do we have your current email and postal address? If not, please tell us. The easiest way is to go online and update your contact details. Simply log-on to the special page on our website www.makemyvotecount.org.uk/supporter.html and enter your name, postcode and email address on the form. If you have your supporter id number (found on the top right-hand corner of the address label of the envelope this mailing came in), please enter that too. Alternatively, email malcolm@makevotescount.org.uk with the word 'subscribe' in the subject line. Thanks.

Make Votes Count - the campaign for a more representative voting system

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.

www.makemyvotecount.org.uk