

2007 and the count down to the next general election

Electoral reformers will look back on 2006 as another year, as with 2005, which showed the current voting system is doing Labour no favours, with evidence of anti-Labour tactical voting in local elections. In 2007 a new voting system will be introduced to Britain. Single Transferable Vote (STV) will be used for the first time in Scottish local elections. Additional Member Systems (AMS) will be used for the third time for the National Assembly of Wales and the Scottish Parliament.

There has already been speculation about non-Labour coalitions, usually avoiding comment on the fact that when Labour is falling in the polls, a more proportional system cushions the fall and even prevents, in the case of Scotland, the cause of independence receiving an unrepresentative majority. STV will also be used in the elections in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Even though we have yet to hear from the Government about their review of voting systems there will be much to look at including the way FPTP performs in low turnout local elections.

Those who fear that PR would bring in the BNP are having to reconsider their arguments. Discussion of the Alternative Vote (AV) is proof that the death knell has been tolled for the parting day of the current voting system. Although as a key constitutional activist in the Liberal Democrat Party recently said "if Labour wants to adopt AV just as it ceases to be a beneficiary of it, I am not going to complain."

Worries that Labour is targeting ever fewer constituencies has led us to discuss Labour's Retreat into its heartlands. For those who attack AMS for having two types of MPs, let's start an honest debate about the quality of representation given to the voters in 'safe' seats as opposed to those where electoral competition in marginals keeps all parties on their toes, in which category most Labour electoral reforming MPs are.

Any decision on electoral reform must be based on principles as well as perceived, and often outdated party interest, weighing up arguments for single and multi-member constituencies. One reason why the UK constitution has never been committed to one document must surely be the absurdity of describing FPTP with its 'winner takes all' basis and ability to magic majorities out of minority support in the country. The replacement House of Lords, wholly or mostly elected, will be the first opportunity for us to rehearse the arguments for democratic pluralism and consensus.

We will think of Robin Cook and Mo Mowlam in our discussion about the quality of our democracy. We need a process inside and outside the Party to discuss ideas like a Citizens' Assembly, a UK Constitutional Convention and/or a written constitution, and, Sir Hayden Phillips' review of funding of political parties. This is not a systems debate but a deeply important decision about where politics goes and what part it plays in this country, and then eventually, to decide a replacement voting system.

Reforming the Vote: Opportunities and challenges for Labour

You are invited to come and discuss how Labour argues for electoral reform in the next year with John Denham MP, Anne Campbell, Martin Linton MP and others. Lunch will be provided.

***From 10.30 for 11.00 start until 4.00 – Saturday 24 February –
6 Chancel Street, London SE1 0UU
(Nearest underground stations Blackfriars, Southwark and Waterloo)***

Strategy Day – Reforming the Vote: opportunities and challenges for Labour

Our Co Chair John Denham MP has agreed to attend our Strategy Day on Saturday 24 February, as detailed on the front page. Anne Campbell will lead off on her experience of Labour's Retreat and Martin Linton MP will brief us on reform from the perspective of the Ministry of Constitutional Affairs.

We hope that we will have the Electoral Reform Society's Ken Ritchie reporting on developments in Scotland, Lewis Baston's prognosis on local elections and Michael Calderbank will look at the BNP. Malcolm Clark will update us on Make Votes

Count. It is hoped that Ann Black will join us in the afternoon. Mary Southcott and Sue Sturgeon will join others we have invited.

We invite you to come and add your ideas and experience to the campaign inside Labour to give democracy a chance and ensure that progressive politics are advanced. Just send your email to lcerinfo@yahoo.co.uk to book your place. It would be good if you could send 100 words about yourself and your current thinking about why electoral reform is fundamental to our politics.

Opportunities as we choose Labour's candidates

In the next year we expect to have leadership elections and there will continue to be selections of candidates in many constituencies. LCER hopes that the leadership contest will be a chance to raise some of the issues on electoral reform, including what we are calling **Labour's Retreat** (see separate questionnaire which we hope you will fill in and return), **the BNP**

Protest Vote (which we are monitoring and would like to hear your local experience) and the proposals in our **next Manifesto** (see Ann Black's summary of the challenge of raising this issue in the National Policy Forum).

Electoral reform has never been a vote winner in selections but candidates, especially in majority, or less euphemistically unwinnable, seats have been a

hugely fruitful recruitment ground for electoral reform over the years. Since candidates are more likely to support before rather than after they become MPs, LCER is monitoring selections and hopes to be in contact with all Labour candidates. You can help by being in touch with your own candidate or sending us their details.

Leadership elections

Electoral reformers will have a variety of different reasons for supporting candidates in the leadership elections. If some of your preferences may be swayed by their position on our issue, we print below some details of statements or rumours of support, in the past. We list in alphabetical order those who have been mentioned in discussions of the 2007 Labour leadership elections:

Hilary Benn attended a trade union discussion with Robin Cook and Will Hutton, when working for MSF, supported Unions 21 and thought to support AV.

Hazel Blears has written on engagement and democracy mentioning electoral reform but believed to be a genuine 'don't know'.

Gordon Brown supported John Smith's referendum in the 1990s and was widely rumoured to be discussing AV in summer 2005.

Jon Cruddas attended the LCER 2006 Strategy Day and indicated that if our campaigns and policies were concentrated on the interests of marginal constituency floating voters as a result of FPTP then he agreed the system should be changed.

Harriet Harman has never knowingly publicly spoken on PR, dealing with turnout and registration. Married to Jack

Dromey who wrote an LCER leaflet for trade unionists speaking at our fringe in the 1990s.

Peter Hain is a key supporter of AV since his 1980s book, *Proportional Misrepresentation*, engaged with LCER's 1990s discussion of AMS, attending Make Votes Count and LCER meetings in 2004.

Alan Johnson spoke with Robin Cook on an LCER platform when General Secretary of the Communications Union, became a sponsor of LCER and since he became an MP, supported AV+ and Make Votes Count even after becoming a minister and recently quoted in the *Independent* in support.

John McDonnell unlike Ken Livingstone on the GLC and some members of the Campaign Group was always FPTP.

John Reid was an advocate of Lib-Lab withdrawing candidates in order that the most likely to remove the sitting Tory MP remained. He once offered to chair an LCER fringe but in November 2004 upset Lord Falconer's plans to launch a proper review of the voting systems.

Jack Straw is a traditional supporter of FPTP but wrote in the 1980s and spoke at the *Independent* fringe in Manchester in favour of AV, and apparently was open to open lists for the European elections.

AGM 2006

Our annual AGM is an opportunity to hear and discuss new ideas with leading supporters with different takes on our campaign. Entitled *A Progressive Consensus on Labour's Future Democratic Reforms* and held on 4 July, LCER's AGM dealt with Labour's thinking on democracy, the Power Inquiry, Lords Reform, Choice of Electoral Systems Bill, the English Question, Votes at 16, the review of voting systems and the referendum. Outgoing Co Chair, Anne Campbell, opened the meeting by remembering that this was the first AGM since Robin Cook gave his final speech on electoral reform. Anne said: "what an incredible advocate Robin Cook was for electoral and constitutional reform, for democratic politics of every kind. We really miss Robin a lot". She then introduced the platform speakers, Co Chair, John Denham MP, David Chaytor MP, Joyce Quin, Member of the House of Lords and Meg Russell, Constitution Unit, University College London.

David Chaytor "a member of LCER sporadically since the first general election he fought in 1987", "not a passionate believer in one solution, or purely proportional voting systems, but because we have chronic problems with our democracy and part of the solution is more electoral reform, and more and more proportional systems." He led the campaign on a Bill which would allow a percentage of citizens to trigger a referendum to change the voting system and establish a citizens' assembly. This had gone down heroically. Britain is the only European country addicted to First Past the Post. "As we move towards the 2009/2010 general election we need something in our manifesto. We cannot have a further watering down of what we said in 1997. We need something that status quo supporters would support and that appeals to both sides of the argument. The irony is that their position would be strengthened because a referendum in their favour would consolidate FPTP."

• *Picture of John Denham addressing the LCER AGM, with from left to right,*

Anne Campbell in the Chair, Meg Russell and Joyce Quin

Joyce Quin was in her own words "A very new member of the House of Lords" and was congratulated on her "levitation". She had not changed her mind in the last three weeks and still supported "a wholly or largely elected House of Lords". She did not think it acceptable for a Chamber of Government to be responsible for amending and revising legislation and dealing with Government business, without there being any public involvement or ownership. "The Lords should not be a clone of the Commons. A lot is made of the expertise in the Lords but a large number of experts spend time voting on subjects which don't relate to their expertise. There is a role for experts and the parties should take that into account in selection processes. Better to deal with this through nominated elements or by cooption onto relevant committees. Powers need to be made clear, to revise and delay but not indefinitely. She asked "What was the future of the Commons in an age of devolution?" The Referendum in the North East was lost which made her cynical about opinion polls. We need to look at ways that existing regional bodies which are taking important decisions can be more democratically controlled. "At the very least the Regional Development Agencies should present their strategy to a public forum, perhaps in the way that the Welsh Grand Committee used to work, perhaps with regional MPs and

MEPs meeting in public, getting media coverage, starting the ball rolling to at least some kind of regional accountability which doesn't exist at the moment."

Meg Russell is a long time supporter of reform and had worked as Advisor with Robin Cook on Lords Reform. She felt strongly that we needed to look at transforming Parliament as a whole and so we needed to consider Lords and Commons reform together, not separately. Both principles and pragmatic arguments need to be considered. She wanted to address three principles. She was not sure that Robin would have agreed with her view of AV for the Commons with a highly proportional Lords as the best opportunity, but he was never afraid to be challenged.

Principle 1: "We want a more plural political system, we don't believe government should be unconstrained, it should be necessary to broaden consensus for change, and perhaps not healthy for small parties, such as the Greens, to be shut out of the system. On all these counts the current House of Lords is offering some of the things that reformers want. It is a no overall control chamber, where Independents and Lib Dems hold the balance of power and it even has Green representation. It has served a role in recent years as a real check on civil liberties. The reform in 1999 was a highly significant reform."

Those who want to cut the powers of the Lords should remember that Labour will benefit greatly if it finds itself in opposition. This situation could be changed at any time by a Government making peers from its own party, so the current situation is vulnerable."

Principle 2: "The two chambers should not be the same." Meg argued that if we get PR for both houses this would be undesirable. Different systems should be based on different principles of representation rather than picking one system and then arguing that for all assemblies.

Principle 3: "The Lords should be more proportional than the Commons rather than vice versa. If the Lords were elected by AV or FPTP then it would make the system unworkable. What we have now is a more proportional Lords. But the government has to rely on alliances to get its legislation through."

Pragmatically the introduction of STV and lists are highly unlikely for the Commons. If change is possible at all it will be AV+, a weak form of AMS or Alternative Vote, Meg argued, therefore, that AV with a proportional Lords was the best opportunity to create a chance of success of highly proportional systems such as regional lists. "The minimalist requirement was to get all parties signed up to proportional appointments. The major gains in pluralism already achieved must be valued, protected and strengthened."

John Denham: In the context of where Labour is, my fear is that we may fail to make the most of the opportunity that should present itself over the next year or so, unless we understand what is at stake and how to put the arguments forward. If the Labour Party is to have a hand in introducing electoral reform it will happen because the principled case for a fairer, more inclusive, voting system comes together with what Labour people feel is the best way of promoting progressive politics, not purely on the merits of a fairer voting system. Therefore we have to make the case that changing the voting

system is not just better in terms of the functioning of our democracy but that it provides the best, and most reliable, way forward for the development of progressive politics in this country and the delivery of a progressive government in power.

Bringing these two arguments together is critical. The danger is that we will miss the time to get that argument into the debate. The Labour Party is focused on the inevitability of a change of leadership. The language people use is coded. The political project that began in the mid 1990s needs to be renewed, refreshed and remodernised because the world has changed in the last ten years and we need a new focus and a new sense of direction. But discussion on the change of the voting system, and its role, is pretty silent in that debate.

One of the great achievements of New Labour was the creation of this very powerful electoral coalition based on the idea that you could create a society which was both able to satisfy the ambitions of aspirant and successful Britain and tackle poverty and exclusion. If you look at recent elections, both ends and all parts of that coalition are under pressure. It is not just that we did not win Blaenau Gwent back but we came fourth in Bromley. In local elections, we are slipping back not just in areas we regard as heartlands but also areas that we were proud to win for the first time at the end of the 1990s. It is critical to our progressive politics to refresh that coalition and to be a party which is not one section of those voters but has an appeal across them.

The profound difficulty of First Past the Post is that it now works against the creation of that broad electoral coalition whoever becomes leader. The inevitable logic of FPTP that no-one has managed to overcome is that there are 30,000 voters who matter, who live in the key seats and are at the right wing edge of the centre ground. Under FPTP it is almost impossible to construct a political approach which is not centrally focused on the wishes and aspirations of those people. We can win the election under FPTP. We have to win the election under FPTP. Let's

recognise that there will be a cost to that for our progressive politics. We will pay a price in how radical, how progressive our Manifesto and our electoral appeal is likely to be. If we don't want that to be the long term future then we have to argue that a voting system that both challenges Labour and provides a stimulus to Labour to rebuild that broad appeal is a better electoral system for us and for progressive politics. As Robin (Cook) said last year, there is a large progressive majority in the voting patterns, the views and the values of the people of this country but it is split in a way that makes it impossible to express that effectively in government.

In the FPTP system, it is not even our appeal that matters to our electoral success. The truth is that our success may well be decided not by anything we do but how the battle between the Liberals and the Tories works out in different constituencies, and how the vote splits between two parties that have nothing to do with us. A new voting system throws up challenges and we have to be honest about this. As the debate about where we go with a new leader goes forward, we have to argue that we want to be a party that is able to fight for every vote and to say that every vote matters across that broad consensus. I don't want to be a party that is saying let's return Blaenau Gwent or does better in north Kent, but a party that works in both those places and all the places in between. ***In my view a better electoral system will make it easier rather than harder to do that.***

John's views appear in the Make Votes Count report of Conference 2006 and a copy of the Independent's article on John and electoral reform – based on his speech to the LCER AGM can be sent to you on request.

Labour Party Conference – 24-28 September 2006 – G-Mex / MICC

A number of LCER volunteers leafleted delegates and fringe meetings for various electoral reform events such as the Make Votes Count Rally on Sunday night and the Democracy Reception on Tuesday. On Wednesday LCER ran a Reformers' Reception sponsored by the Electoral Reform Society where supporters and speakers met up and heard from the following.

Austin Mitchell MP felt we were making progress but that AV should not be viewed as a step towards electoral reform. Full reform of the voting system is necessary in order for the system to become "fair and democratic". If there is a hung parliament following the next election that will pave the way for reform of the voting system which will lead to "full democracy".

Richard Howitt MEP remembered past rallies convened by electoral reformers and how both Mo Mowlam and Robin Cook were greatly missed. There needs to be a move towards democracy and a fairer approach to the voting system. There is no need for electoral reformers to be downhearted as the moral cause for electoral reform is as important as it ever was. He noted that democracy had been discussed at this Conference more than in the past 21 years. In order to tackle the disengagement most people feel about the electoral system, a fairer voting system is needed which enables individuals to have ownership and belief in the system. In Europe the proportional system is the norm. The Politics of Europe is "less silly and less confrontational" and

principled, consensual politics is usual. Through a proportional system of voting, politics could be improved.

Richard Burden MP felt it was not easy being an electoral reformer. He was the Chair of LCER when the Jenkins Report was first introduced and when it "got kicked out". The issue is not going to go away and we must, therefore, react to the political situation. AV is not a clever way of pursuing the ultimate objective. Proportional representation must be seen as a vehicle for achieving social change and a mechanism that will bring about change in society. Consensus should be moved in a progressive direction. This consensus would force individuals to face up to difficult issues. Through compromise and negotiation we should work out where our principles are. Where the "red lines" are. We should force the progressive issues onto the political agenda. People are becoming disconnected from politics and we ignore this at our peril. It is necessary to work out ways that ensure democracy works. Parliaments need to be elected but it is necessary to recognise the difference between government and legislature. Voters must be given more power. Democracy must be talked about so we don't lose our voters. We should all hold on to the vision of new politics and stick with our commitment to reform.

Councillor Kris Brown delivered his first speech at a conference fringe and a summarised version appears below.

Councillor Kris Brown, newly elected in Enfield in May 2006, addressed the Reformers' Reception on the last night of conference:

We've heard a lot about renewal at this conference, but we need to be clear about what we mean by 'renewal'. It's not about the personalities of who's going to be leader, it's about the policies that we want our Labour Party to adopt. So this is the best opportunity we've had in years to get electoral reform firmly on the agenda.

In the local elections in Barking and Dagenham, the BNP received around 8,500 votes across the borough and gained 12 seats, whereas the Tories gained 9,500

votes across the borough and only gained 1 seat. This surely shows the unfairness in our current electoral system, and to all critics of PR who say it lets small parties like the BNP into positions of power, I think the situation in Barking and Dagenham is a good example of how PR could improve local government.

In my borough of Enfield, we would have taken overall control in May under PR as the Tories would have lost seats to a couple of Lib Dems and more

Save Chase Farm Hospital candidates. In places like Camden, where Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) scores showed that Camden was an up and coming borough, Labour had the most number of votes across the borough but unfortunately lost control to the Tories.

I think this shows how much work we have to do and why our campaign for electoral reform is just.

What the BNP does next?

Lewis Baston, author of the ERS analysis of the local elections, reports back from the Labour Friends of Searchlight meeting on 27 September

UNISON North West, Searchlight magazine and Martin Salter MP sponsored an interesting fringe meeting at the Manchester Party Conference. The focus of the meeting was on how Labour, and people in civil society, can campaign most effectively against the BNP. The electoral system naturally featured in discussion.

Searchlight's Nick Lowles told the meeting that even in the absence of any BNP leaflets or campaigning the party was getting a uniform floor level of support across the country of something like 5 to 8 per cent when it stood for election. Support is not just a localised problem. The BNP would target the London Assembly elections in 2008 and, in the absence of the concurrent European Parliament election, would be likely to sweep up more of the right wing vote, a lot of which had gone to UKIP in 2004. The BNP are challenging for a seat in every region in 2009, although ERS reckons the North East is virtually impossible.

Jon Cruddas MP spoke about the lack of relation between the scripted, choreographed oratory and politics at the national level with life as it is experienced by people in

Dagenham. People were struggling with housing pressure, health inequality, declining real wages and demographic change. There had been a 'cartelisation' of politics, with the search for swing voters in the target seats. Campaigns were aimed at their interests and 'swerve around their prejudices'. Political leaders were starting to sound alike and even look alike, Cameron, Clegg and some Labour people even seem physically interchangeable. Given the system, it is rational for politicians to do this. It leaves difficult issues and awkward questions for the people and communities who are taking the strain of change. The shiny new future doesn't seem relevant in Dagenham. How can we re-enfranchise people?

Martin Salter MP chaired the meeting, and quoted Frank Dobson as saying that the BNP "are vultures – they feed on dead meat". Healthy mainstream party politics, in which parties articulate ideas and interests, and relate to voters, denies the BNP the space they need to grow. In Oldham, where the BNP was beaten back without it winning a seat, there is competition between Labour and Liberal Democrat but this competition does

not "let in" the BNP. There was an example from one ward in Calderdale where there were three tower blocks in the middle of a council estate ward – and only 19 people in those blocks voted in the previous elections. These blocks were ignored by the mainstream parties because the people there did not vote. When the BNP came round, showing an interest in those voters and knocking on doors, this encouraged the people in those blocks to come out for the BNP. In a ward in Burnley the BNP had all three seats thanks to 700 votes in each election, one in six of the electorate.

Nick Lowles concluded that improved powers for local government would encourage people to use their votes seriously. First Past the Post remains the only system under which the BNP has won representation, but the London elections in 2008 are a difficult challenge. PR for the Assembly means that voters all over London can do their bit to defeat the BNP by turning out and voting – and this applies just as much in Barnet and Brent, where the BNP may seem very distant, as it does on the front line in Barking.

PR bubbling up the agenda

Emily Georghiou attended the Fabian meeting *How Can Labour Re-engage the White Working Classes* with MPs Liam Byrne, Jon Cruddas, Mary Creagh and Jim Devine on the platform.

Jon Cruddas refuted the interpretation that all those who voted for the British National Party were racist explaining that a chasm had opened between Labour policies and the needs of the white working class in his constituency. A question was put to the platform asking whether changing to a proportional voting system might help close this chasm. If the electoral system was changed we wouldn't have to appeal to the 30,000 voters in marginal constituencies, who were floating voters often with an agenda influenced by the Daily Mail. Unfortunately, the platform ignored the subject.

During a recent Q&A with Emily's MP and students from his constituency visiting Westminster, another question came up about PR. Emily believes that this issue is out there but there is no channel for this debate currently.

Emily Georghiou is on the LCER Executive and is the Women's Officer.

Is Electoral Reform a Woman's Issue?

Women's representation is on average ten per cent higher in countries with more proportional systems. As a result, our electoral system is widely considered to be the worst for women. Single member constituencies make it harder for women and marginalised groups to get selected and therefore elected. As under First Past the Post (FPTP), voters don't have the chance to choose between candidates from the same party, they can't favour women.

It is not just women seeking election who are let down by our voting system. Women voters and constituents can feel disempowered when their choices are limited at the ballot box and when they see our negative, aggressive political culture in operation. Women particularly value politicians who are willing to work together constructively – electoral reform would help to foster this.

A fair electoral system is part of the package of measures which are needed to increase the number of women and marginalised groups who are elected. Under the current system, voters are only ever presented with a shortlist of one – very often a white, middle class man. Parties can play a role by twinning constituencies; through all women

shortlists or zipping lists which alternate men and women; or at least providing more representative lists of candidates for voters to choose from. These are, however, only steps to try and compensate for the unfairness inherent in the system. We need to remove the barriers to women's representation by reforming the electoral system to make it more equitable. If equality is our goal, we cannot simply be satisfied with giving women a leg up over the hurdles in their way – we must reform the system that entrenches these.

Not all of those who care about seeing more women in Parliament know that FPTP is a key barrier to women's representation. We believe that raising awareness of this important argument will help to win more support for electoral reform.

For more information or to receive our monthly updates on women and politics, contact Christine, Electoral Reform Society Women's Officer on christine@reform.demon.co.uk or 020 7928 1622 or if you want to promote some of these ideas in the Labour Party, contact the LCER Women's Officer, Emily Georghiou, at lcerinfo@yahoo.co.uk or 020 7928 2076.

LCER friends

We congratulate Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge), Ayfer Orhan (Hemel Hempstead) and Andrew Pakes (Milton Keynes North East) for being selected to fight the next election.

Those who knew her will be sad to hear Susan Gibb died in September. She was the 1992 Tiverton Labour candidate, LCER sponsor and South West regional representative. She fed in her knowledge and ideas even when unable to make Executive meetings.

Lee Findell (former coordinator at Make Votes Count and still an LCER regional representative) and

Sarah Ward (Connect, former Unions 21 and daughter of Dave Ward who worked with LCER when on the Labour NEC and as Education Officer in the National Communications Union and Communications Workers Union) gave birth to a baby boy Noah Rufus Findell on Friday 27 October.

Phil Davis has become the Network Director for Regional Action West Midlands and Hugh Raven is now Director of the Soil Association in Edinburgh.

Former LCER Administrative Coordinator Shelagh Jones, now reverted to her birth name Hume, has moved to Gloucester.

Clare Short resigned the Labour Whip in October and now sits as 'Independent Labour'. She argues that a hung parliament, bringing about electoral reform, would be the best result at the next general election. This is, however, not a call for Labour MPs to lose their seats. It is a challenge to those who support electoral reform to argue for this in conditions where some are saying that a Labour defeat is not out of the question.

Oona King has adopted a child and continues to promote her politics, and ours, in the media.

Ken Ritchie, Chief Executive of the Electoral Reform Society, looks forward to 2007 for Labour reformers

Looking at the year ahead, any election is important for Labour, and most provide opportunities for Labour reformers, but the introduction of STV for Scottish local elections will be particularly challenging. Having been in government for ten years, we can expect Labour to lose seats, but where First Past the Post has allowed Labour to dominate councils in spite of having a minority of the votes, it is inevitable that a change to a more proportional system will cost Labour seats. It will therefore be a difficult election for Labour and we can expect the old guard to use seat losses in arguing that electoral reform was all a big mistake.

Nevertheless, we are confident that the Scottish local elections can be a success story for democracy. They will make councils more representative and more responsive and they should open the way for further reforms. But we cannot just assume success – if people are to make the change from ‘X’ voting to the listing of preferences without an unacceptable number of spoilt ballots, a big public information programme will be needed. The Scottish Executive and Electoral Commission will of course be running their campaigns, but to add to their efforts we have opened an Electoral Reform Society office in Edinburgh – at 91 Hanover Street, EH2 1DJ. Telephone 0131 718 4280.

While the election may be difficult for Labour, that does not mean it cannot be a Labour success. Doing well in STV elections requires good candidates, popular policies and a good, vigorous campaign – all points on which we hope Labour

can score well. There are many councils that Labour can hope to hold, and others where we can expect Labour to win seats where it has never won them before. If the new voting system improves democracy, remember that it was a Labour led Scottish Executive that made it possible.

Campaigning in an STV election is not difficult, but it is different, and the Society is therefore ready to help CLPs, candidates and agents with whatever information they need to make their campaigns as effective as possible. Our ‘*Campaigning Under STV*’ booklet has now been revised – if you would like an updated copy, please contact us and we will send one without charge. If you would like someone to visit your CLP or campaign team, or if you would like materials to enable members to brief themselves, get in touch.

The Scottish local elections are also important to those of us south of the border. We need to use the Scottish experience to demonstrate that there are better ways of electing councils, and to argue the unfairness of England and Wales being denied the benefits offered to the Scots.

We will also, of course, be monitoring the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and English local elections. We expect to be able to use the AMS elections to point to the advantages of proportionality. English local elections will no doubt produce the usual crop of bizarre results which we will use in arguing the case for change. Our report of the 2006 English local elections is almost out-of-stock but is available on our website (www.electoral-reform.org.uk). We still have

copies of our leaflet, ‘*How Healthy is your Majority?*’, which illustrates Labour’s performance in last year’s local elections.

Publications available from the Society include:

- *How Healthy is your Majority* (see above): we can supply bulk copies of this leaflet for use in Labour meetings
- Copies of Neil Kinnock’s speech to the LCER / Make Votes Count rally at the 2005 Party Conference
- *The Missing Modernisation: the case for PR in local government elections* joint, Electoral Reform Society / MVC booklet (2004)
- *Direct Elections for a Second Chamber*, Lewis Baston (2004)
- For those involved in Scottish local elections, *Campaigning Under STV, Q and A’s on STV, STV Myth Buster* and other leaflets

Forthcoming publications include:

- Our own alternative review of Britain’s experience of different voting systems which we are preparing as an alternative to the long-awaited review promised in the Labour manifesto
- A media briefing pack for the May elections – although this is being produced for the media, it may also be of use to LCER members who may want to respond to events in their local media.

Please contact Michael Calderbank at the Electoral Reform Society, 6 Chancel Street, London SE1 0UU, or michael@electoral-reform.org.uk, if you would like free copies of the above materials or to keep in contact with ERS.

Electoral Reform and the National Policy Forum

Ann Black

The National Policy Forum will meet again in 2007, and then only for one-day rather than weekend events. This does not matter much because the Forum only takes decisions in its final year, and emphasising local and regional forums should give more members more opportunities to contribute. The Policy Commissions will continue to receive and acknowledge submissions, and the Forum first-year document gives several openings: questions about further parliamentary and constitutional reform, but also concerns about separation from the democratic process. As Jon Cruddas has argued, First Past the Post disenfranchises the inner-city working class in favour of Middle England swing voters, and allows extremism to take hold.

All messages should be sent to the Crime, Justice, Citizenship and Equalities policy commission at: pip3.crimejustice@new.labour.org.uk.

The members of this policy commission are Diana Holland and John Reid (co-convenors), Ann Black, Maggie Cosin, Charlie Falconer, Robert Ffello MP, Georgina Hirsch, Lisa Homan, Joe Mann, Dave Roberts, Hamish Sandison, Catherine Stihler MEP, Jack Straw MP and Bill Thomas. The Commission covers the whole Home Office and constitutional agenda, so electoral reform needs pushing up the list.

The deeper problem is that both the Commission and the NPF have inbuilt majorities against reform which may persist until Labour are thrown out of office and lose the power to change the system for good. The introduction of Single Transferable Vote for Scottish local government is already under attack as setting party members against each other.

So the campaign needs to respond to specific criticisms, and to build a broad and vocal coalition for change before it is too late.

Please send copies of your submissions to Ann Black at annblack@acedial.co.uk.

TUC 2006

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

• *Picture of Richard Burden, Mary Southcott and Neal Lawson at the TUC fringe event*

LCER was represented by Richard Burden MP and Mary Southcott (in the Chair) when Neal Lawson addressed the Make Votes Count/Electoral Reform Society Trades' Union Congress fringe. Although it was a small event this was a useful occasion in determining a consensus on the most up to date arguments for reform for a Labour audience.

This helped Malcolm Clark and Mary Southcott to finalise the copy for the membership leaflet designed and drafted by Sue Sturgeon.

Views and reviews

An Alternative View

Gareth Thomas MP writes on the adoption of AV for local government, How Electoral Change can Reconnect Voters in a new pamphlet by the New Local Government Network, New Ways to Modernise in their series on Labour and Localism.

Gareth Thomas argues that the current First Past the Post (FPTP) system should be replaced by the Alternative Vote (AV) and trialled in elections to the London Assembly and local council elections. AV is certainly not the complete answer to the questions our political system faces but – in that it ensures that politicians have to earn a more representative mandate – it will help. AV builds on the strengths of the current FPTP system while at the same time increasing the incentive to turn out and vote. In addition, AV will force politicians and their parties to operate in a different way – helping them to reconnect with more of the electorate. AV would also have another important benefit in reducing the need for tactical voting, another increasing symptom of the disillusionment with FPTP. In seats where any one party has a traditional built in majority, voters are often forced to vote for their second choice if they want to remove the incumbent politician or register a protest vote. Under AV there would be less desire for such tactical voting because people could vote for their first choice knowing that they still had a second or third option. AV therefore allows voters to vote positively rather than negatively by enabling people to rank all the candidates in order of preference.

This is a useful piece to provoke discussion. Although many electoral reformers would see AV as an improvement on the current truncated version of AV,

Supplementary Vote, used in Mayoral elections, not many would share Gareth's view that the whole point of the voting system is to give the MP or Councillor a mandate from their constituency. Instead councils or government should be encouraged to be in contact with, and try and build consensus for, its policies and actions, or a combination weighing up both these principles. Nor would most of us accept that the STV to be used in Scotland is a form of AV, rather it is the other way about, AV being STV in single member constituencies which is hardly what we have in local government.

Democratic Ideas and the British Labour Movement 1880 – 1914

*Logie Barrow and Ian Bullock
Cambridge University Press (1996)
paperback 2006*

It isn't often that the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform features in the introduction to a book and as a barometer of concern for democracy inside the Labour Party. Written in 1996, before Labour had its big opportunity of implementing constitutional and democratic, as well as social and economic change, this book was published this year in paperback on the 100th anniversary of the first Parliamentary Labour Party. Debates on House of Lords reform, ownership of the process of going to war and enfranchisement and Proportional Representation were at the top of their agenda.

Electoral reformers in Labour and the trades' unions were mentioned: Keir Hardie, Philip Snowden, Mary MacArthur, William Crawford Anderson, Harry Quelch, G H Roberts, Will Thorne and Fred Knee who wrote "We are democrats as well as socialists".

Billy Bragg keeps electoral reform on the agenda

John Hurley reports from the Cheltenham Festival of Literature

Billy Bragg appeared at Cheltenham Literature Festival to promote his book *The Progressive Patriot*. He is from Dagenham and wrote this book partly as a response to the success of the BNP in the local elections. The book itself is an attempt to define Britishness and Englishness in terms other than the ethnocentric views which are the stock in trade of the BNP. He recognises different conceptions of Britishness but regards one tradition as being of particular importance. This is the tradition of radical dissent, in which Bragg is able to locate his own antecedents, with its stress on values of fairness, equality and tolerance. The book is a series of essays which explore this theme.

In the discussion on the book at the festival Bragg, a long standing electoral reformer, situated the current upsurge of intolerant nationalism in the our present political system. This in its concentration on middle class opinion in a handful of swing constituencies has ignored the needs of working class Labour voters. It is these voters who have experienced the full impact of free trade policies and global competition in manufactures, with the Ford plants for example closing in Dagenham. At the same time, with grossly insufficient social housing being built, they find themselves in competition with migrant labour for the remaining cheap housing. With nowhere else to go politically, the lure of the BNP has corrupted their natural tolerance and their socialist, internationalist view. Bragg's view is that a fairer electoral system based on proportionality, with a reformed House of Lords, would enable such voters' views to be

heard more readily, and would require a quicker response, for example to the building of social housing. It would in turn sustain the radical and progressive tradition of Britishness of which we can be proud.

Billy Bragg also appeared with John Harris in a lunch time debate at the Compass conference in June and was in his usual slot at the Tolpuddle Rally. Make Votes Count had a stall there, run by Malcolm Clark, with some help from Chris Martin and Mary Southcott.

The Progressive Patriot: a search for belonging is published by Bantam Press, priced £17.99.

NB A transcription of Robin Cook's last speech is available in the Chartist Supplement on Electoral Reform and is available from Make Votes Count / LCER on 020-7928-2076

Introducing our new LCER Administrative Coordinator

We should like to thank Steve Cockburn for his injection of thinking and his work on the LCER Newsletter in May and wish him luck, while welcoming his successor Sue Sturgeon.

Sue has been the part-time Administrative Coordinator for LCER since June. For the remainder of her working time she works in an educational publishing and research company. She has been supportive of the electoral reform movement for over twenty years and has been active in LCER for over 10 years. She is currently Chair of Tewkesbury Constituency Labour Party in Gloucestershire and Secretary of Winchcombe and Bishops Cleeve Branch (which is the only active branch in Tewkesbury Constituency). She is on the South West Regional Board as one of the two Gloucestershire representatives and is a delegate to Gloucestershire County Party.

For nearly twelve years she has served on Winchcombe Town Council. She is a governor at two schools and a member of the local Youth Club Management Committee. She has stood for election on a number of occasions to Tewkesbury Borough Council and Gloucestershire County Council but as the Tewkesbury area is not natural Labour territory, and remained Conservative even in 1997, has limited chance of success under our current electoral system.

Introducing Michael Calderbank Electoral Reform Society's Political Campaigns Officer

Michael joined the ERS just before Christmas. He originally hails from Preston in Lancashire and holds a PhD from the University of Manchester. He joined the Labour Party under John Smith's leadership and became convinced of the need for electoral reform by the experience of seeing his vote go to waste in the ultra-safe Conservative seat of Fylde. Michael was actively involved in the Durham CLP at the time of the 1997 election and, on moving back to the North West, he has been active in local campaigning against the BNP and has worked with trade unionists, and other Labour movement activists to ensure that working

class communities retain a political voice. This year's Labour Party Conference, held in Manchester, saw Michael engaged in promoting and attending Conference fringe events, and he now relishes the opportunity to ensure that electoral reform has a key place in debates about re-engaging those currently alienated from the political process.

Outside of politics, Michael is interested in most sports (as a spectator!), and is an avid supporter of his home-town football team, Preston North End. He is also keenly interested in Labour history, modern art, literature and a wide range of music.

LCER Executive 2006-07

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Virendra Sharma
Gareth Robson
Anand Shukla
Willie Sullivan

Parliamentary & Political Officer

Mary Southcott

Administrative Coordinator

Sue Sturgeon

Contact details of the Executive and Regional Representatives are contained in the LCER Directory.

Dates for your diary

Date	Event	Location
27 January	North West Campaign Forum	Manchester
27 January	Scottish Campaign Forum	Central Scotland
3 February	National Young Supporters Event	Newcastle
10 February	Yorkshire and Humber Campaign Forum	Leeds
10 February	Women's Forum	West Bromwich
10 February	Next Generation Forum (for all councillors and council candidates)	London
10 February	Equalities Forum	London
17 February	South West Campaign Forum	Exeter
17 February	North Campaign Forum	Sunderland
16-18 February	Youth Conference	Glasgow
17 February	Ethnic Minority Taskforce Campaign Forum	Glasgow
22-24 February	Welsh Conference	Llandudno
24 February	South East Campaign Forum	Gillingham
24 February	West Midlands Campaign Forum	Birmingham
24 February	New Members Welcome Event	London
24 February	LCER Strategy Day	London
3 March	East Midlands Campaign Forum	Gedling
3 March	London Ethnic Minorities Campaign Forum	London
10 March	Women's Forum	Leeds
9-11 March	Eastern Region Conference	Bedford
3 May	Elections – Scotland, Wales and England	
July	LCER AGM	London
14-15 July	Tolpuddle Rally	Tolpuddle

Questionnaires and Labour's Retreat

We thank all of you who have supported the different politics which would flow from electoral reform and helped the work of LCER over the year. Thank you to all those who sent in ideas in last year's questionnaire. This is our way of ensuring that LCER belongs to its members and electoral reformers in Labour generally. We used these when compiling our membership leaflet and please use the one accompanying this mailing to join, or recruit a member among your Labour friends.

We hope to raise awareness of the way politics is distorted by tactical resourcing in Labour's general election campaign by getting a picture of how local parties receive help and

encouragement for their local campaigns. Please take a few minutes to answer our questions on **Labour's Retreat** and return to us, or we can email you a copy to return as an attachment. Just send us your request to lcerinfo@yahoo.co.uk.

We are also monitoring the 'English Question' which we expect to dominate the Tory attack on Gordon Brown, particularly in the 300th anniversary of the Act of Union with Scotland.

If you have views on any area of constitutional change and reform please contact us. If you can raise the issue in local newspapers please do and let us have a copy of your letter.