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Make Votes Count Campaign Update: Spring 2007

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

If electoral reform is good enough for an increasing numbers of politicians ...

No longer can it be seen as just a few isolated individuals 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. It is noticeable how increasingly fewer people are prepared to come out in defence of First Past the Post - and that can only be a good thing.

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 supported reform for every one opposed.

➔ **Then we have to make the most of this new situation and build on it.** We have the arguments, we just need to get them out there. So let's continue to recruit new supporters; attend events and raise the subject whenever we get the opportunity.

'A Mood for Reform' - MVC's response to Lords Reform

With an absolute majority of MPs voting for a fully elected Lords, and the 80% elected option also passing, the will of the Commons seems clear.

Yet although the principle of patronage was soundly rejected, we must not allow it to slip through the backdoor later in the reform process. The government's proposed electoral system (partially open lists) could end up being appointment by another name. Parties - rather than the voters - would get most control over the order of candidates on the list. A place at the top of a party's regional list could become a very valuable commodity, an 'honour' that could be bestowed on a preferred individual. That goes against both the end to appointment signalled by the Commons vote, and also the prevailing mood for reform across the country.

The public needs to have faith in whatever system is chosen for elections to the second chamber. What we do not want is a repeat of the way the closed list system was adopted for electing MEPs, which undermined public confidence in those elections and resulted in a system which denies voters any choice of candidates. We need to have a proper debate, rather than simply having these policies handed down from on high. With legislation unlikely to be imminent, there is still time for the government to start seeking the views and active involvement of the public in deciding what the voting system should be.

This is where MVC supporters come in ... **Send the enclosed postcard to your MP to put across these points.** Further copies available from the MVC office. Find out who your MP is via www.electthelords.org.uk or call the Commons Information Office on 020 7219 4272.



Credit: Unlock Democracy

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 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, and 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."

Martin Linton has stepped down from MVC's Management Committee and we are grateful for his contribution over the years. **Greg Power**, who was an advisor to Robin Cook, has joined the Committee.

MVC Office News

Special mention and thanks to **Clare Jones**, **Paul Davies** and **Steve Skelton** 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 (see picture on right). Paul worked for ERS and maintained MVC's blog until last autumn. Steve was an intern and blogger between Dec and Feb and now has a job at the Local Government Association. **Caroline Leneghan** is our current 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. As part of this we have updated our campaign strapline (see the front page header).

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

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

You can do your bit for the campaign by handing out the enclosed 'Shake up Politics' flyer. Pass it on to a colleague, friend or anyone else who you think might be interested in our message but is new to it. Further copies of the flyer are available from the MVC office. Posters may also be available later, if demand.

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.

Political Briefing

The 646 Seat Strategy

If political parties are serious about putting genuine power in people's hands, their celebration of the electoral significance of the 48 super-marginals (seats where the incumbent has an extremely slim majority) seems odd. True, under the current electoral system, those seats and the support of swing voters there are vital to achieving election victory. But at what cost?

For example, can the needs of those living in social housing be fairly weighted with those of homeowners when it is that latter group whom a party is specifically seeking to win over? When it comes to the crunch, 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 - in all parties and beyond - must demand a system that delivers 646 marginal constituencies, rather than just those 48.

NB. Boundary changes mean the total number of seats at the next general election will increase to 650.

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.

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.

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.

Party Funding

If public funding of parties was based to any degree on vote share, this would bolster the case for preference voting. Furthermore, a reformed voting system would remove the opportunity for wealthy donors to have undue influence on the electoral process, by minimising the effectiveness of the Lord Ashcroft-type strategy of pouring money into a handful of local parties in winnable seats.



Taking the Campaign Forward

We have to make use of new opportunities as they arise. (1) Lords reform (see postcard campaign); party funding; the English Question and other constitutional reform debates. (2) the experience of voters under PR - 3 May 2007 and the Scottish STV local elections, Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliamentary elections. (3) Local government reform. All are and will continue to be explored in more detail on our website and blog.

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 - updated almost daily to highlight the dynamic nature of the campaign.

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 go to www.makemyvotecount.org.uk/supporter.html Or, email malcolm@makevotescount.org.uk with the word 'subscribe' in the subject line.

MVC receives much of its regular funding through the generosity of supporters. If you haven't already done so, please consider taking out a **standing order** for £3 or £5 per month. Forms are available from the MVC office. You can also make a one-off donation by cheque or online, on our website.

Make Votes Count 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 office.

The **Talk Democracy website forum** is now up and running. Talk Democracy is co-hosted by a range of organisations which campaign for democratic renewal, including Hansard Society, Electoral Reform Society, Make Votes Count, Unlock Democracy, Our Say and Republic. Join in the debate online - via the 'forum' link on our website or direct at: www.talkdemocracy.org.uk/talk

Talk Democracy has specific sections on electoral systems, turnout, parliament, devolution, local government and general campaigning. In addition, there are local area groups for you to check and swap information about what is happening in your region.

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

Supported by: Christian Socialist Movement, Conservative Action for Electoral Reform, Electoral Reform Society, Fawcett Society, Green Party, Liberal Democrats, Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform, Plaid Cymru, Unlock Democracy and X-Change. MVC also has over ten thousand individual supporters.

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