
Reversing Labour Retreat

the challenge and change of electoral reform



**Labour Campaign for
Electoral Reform**

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Reversing Labour Retreat: the challenge and change of electoral reform

The idea of examining and reversing what we have termed '**Labour Retreat**' arose from discussions over the past eighteen months by Labour electoral reformers, looking for answers and actions to rebuild the Party we care passionately about and are active within at all levels. It was about the need to not only make the link between more democratic voting systems and other necessary constitutional reforms, but also make that quite separate link with the Party, the way it campaigns, its local membership and activism. It was about recognising that the voting system helps determine how voters, political parties and arguably the government behave, and thus seeing the potential for how voting reform could be beneficial to the Labour Party and its values and aims, as well as to the interests of democracy and cohesion.

This pamphlet is intended to be a positive contribution to Labour's thinking. It isn't intended to be a critique of what is the most natural targeting strategy under the current First Past the Post voting system. The starting point was that we felt and noticed that not only did Labour seem to be focusing its campaigning effort, and arguably its policies, on floating voters in marginal constituencies, but with successive elections, this meant that we were retreating from more and more areas of the country. The Party seemed only to be focusing on seats that have been deemed to be key marginals, which were determined centrally. We were concerned that the First Past the Post system was – and is continuing to be – harmful to Labour's long term interests in terms of party organisation, standing candidates in every seat, winning councils and councillors, and holding onto our current MPs.

In autumn 2006, **Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform** drew up a questionnaire (see Appendix 1) and asked Labour Party activists to tell us their local stories, to see what the pattern was like across the country. The response from the marginal target seats was very positive but the rest told a different story.

The political context has moved on since then and is now – superficially at least – more favourable. Taking a short term view, Labour can continue to accentuate the positive and build on its successes at Westminster. It can rely on a new leader, the bounce in the polls, and pass over the negatives from the local election results, pointing out that between general elections voters tend to vote against the Government in local elections.

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The underlying position of the Party's base in the country has not greatly changed, however. Labour's leadership comes almost by definition from its safer seats where the problem can be turnout and lack of incentive to go out to win the extra votes. Labour's claim to represent the whole country is undermined by the regions, where outside its main towns and cities it is not represented. The Party tends to take the line that that is OK if Lib Dems or Conservatives take seats in rural areas and in the south, because we are taking them in urban and suburban areas and in Wales and Scotland.

The 1997 election was a watershed. Suddenly it was possible to walk or drive through England using Labour constituencies like stepping stones to join up the country. The big success was repeated in 2001 with the gain of Dorset South. But in 2005 Labour's majority fell and the Conservatives actually gained more votes in England, despite Labour winning 90 more seats. Robin Cook drew attention to this on the occasion of LCER's AGM in July 2005, asking *'how would we feel if the Tory Party had got 35% share of the vote and a majority of 66 in the House of Commons?'*

The Catch 22 for electoral reform is that voting systems are seen from a zero-sum perspective. If you win or think you are about to win, you go on supporting the current system with all its defects. If you even start to question the long term interests of democracy or even one's own party, this is thought of as defeatism. In government, if you allow a debate on electoral reform, you are seen as admitting you cannot or might not win an overall victory in the next election. While, in opposition, parties cannot implement change. Robin Cook's nightmare was that after 12 years in office, holding the ability to reform the electoral system, we failed to do so, thus finding ourselves in opposition, for a decade of Conservative government, regretting that we left in place the electoral system that allowed Conservative governments on a minority vote.

In this pamphlet leading Labour thinkers give their views. Some contributions are dedicated to the regions where Labour is experiencing some discomfort, others are more psephological, examining the way local government results eventually feed into results at Westminster or the very different tactics needed under proportional elections. The common strand which emerges is that the targeting necessary to win elections under our current voting system is destroying our politics and creating unnecessary polarisation, disillusion and lack of engagement. Labour's claim to represent the whole country is undermined by the regions and areas where it fails to get representation. It may be cheaper to

run an election in targeted marginals, but at what longer term cost to the Party or our democracy? Let us consider all ideas and funding reforms that make it easier to get our message across everywhere.

Pragmatically or democratically, electoral reform is an issue which needs addressing. The discussion cannot wait until an eventual defeat and can be linked to other constitutional and democratic changes which Labour has delivered or is still discussing delivering. With the establishment of the Commission for Equalities and Human Rights in October 2007, could this be a time for looking at the postcode lottery that is the voting system, and moving towards a situation where votes have equal value and the human right is to have a voice in a politics that makes people matter?

We hope you will find the articles and quotations in this pamphlet both interesting and stimulating, and urge you to examine your own constituency and let us know your stories and thinking.

"A PR system would give minority parties like Labour in Fylde an opportunity for participation in local government."

Bill Taylor (Fylde CLP)

Reversing Labour Retreat and Southern Discomfort

John Denham MP

John Denham is the MP for Southampton Itchen, one of the few seats Labour gained in the south in 1992. He resigned from Government at the same time as Robin Cook in 2003, took over the Co-Chair of LCER with Anne Campbell in 2005 and in 2006 with Mark Lazarowicz MP. He became the Secretary of State for the new Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills in June 2007.

The July launch of the Green Paper on affordable housing is exciting. It will translate into a series of local battles and campaigns particularly in the south and the south east, to win political support to build affordable homes. In half of the councils where that battle takes place there is no Labour councillor. We have no representation in those places. It means that Westminster and our government will inevitably end up having to deal with councils that are run and dominated by our political opponents who do not want us to provide affordable housing for the people of this country, who do not want people to have somewhere they can afford to live. One consequence of the electoral system – though it's not just the electoral system of course – is that doing the right thing becomes more and more difficult. We have got a real problem as a government that wants to change our society.

This is one illustration of why the focus of the **Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform** over the last year has been on the political problems that stem from First Past the Post. In his Democracy paper, Gordon Brown sets out the ambition of a new concordat, a new arrangement with local government. It certainly means a clearer definition of what is to be devolved and what lies with Westminster, and of the limits of centralism and targets. This concordat will be carried out with a local government in which only a minority of councils, up and down the country are Labour. In other words the political beneficiaries, under our electoral system, are not our people. This doesn't mean the concordat is the wrong thing to do. It's the right thing to do because we want to revitalise democracy in this country. But our presence in local government is very important to deliver our priorities. And as the Tories found out, when you have no local government base, it becomes harder to hold a Westminster base.

As southern Labour MPs and activists, we must not sit around moaning about the rest of the Labour Party. Some of us who were involved 15-20 years ago, in an organisation called Third Place First, with ambitions to take a Labour seat from third place to first place. We did this in my seat in 1992 and in a number

of other places in 1997. We are revisiting that territory this year. We are not going to sit around and wait for anyone from the Labour Party, we are just going to get on and do it. There are some places where we have lost some seats because we haven't organised or campaigned well enough and we've been waiting for the cavalry to come over the hill. Labour in the south needs to do better.

As I said in my *Revisiting Southern Discomfort* Fabian lecture, electoral reform is important for the south. A more representative voting system would, at a stroke, give Labour better representation and greater legitimacy. It would, almost certainly, increase Labour's overall vote somewhat by bringing into the open our support which is currently suppressed in unwinnable seats. A reformed electoral system would also force Labour to consider more explicitly the interests of voters outside the areas we currently hope to hold.

As soon as he became Prime Minister, Gordon Brown set about a debate on democracy. Like all good debates it will not be limited to the content of the Democracy statement made to the House of Commons. Once the debate is out there people will take it where they want. Mentions of electoral reform or Lords Reform are quite limited and circumspect, but those issues are part of the debate. It's right that electoral reformers should push our case and say what we really want.

What is it that LCER stands for? First, we are pluralists, which is not the same as coalitionists. We recognise that while the differences between political parties define the major choices to be made by society, some issues cross political parties. Ideally, you need a political system that can express that. Second, we are democrats. We think that people's votes should matter. Third, we are Labour. We are not just democrats but we want democracy because in a democracy there's more chance of Labour's values being implemented in our society. This is why it is important we have a system which gives us representation in local government where things also happen and not just success in Westminster.

The primary focus of our debate on reversing Labour Retreat is about our Labour identity. The current electoral system narrows our chances of producing the sort of society in which Labour values are successfully implemented. First, you gradually lose your base. Second, that the logic of the key seats and super marginal strategy is that you construct a politics around the interests of a relatively small number of swing voters in those key seats. Under

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First Past the Post, it is logical. You employ staff and election organisers to win you general elections and they will tell you that is what you need to do. You want to win the election, these are the two thousand people and these are their characteristics in each of your 40 key seats that will win you the election. In one sense you are daft to ignore them. I'm not suggesting there is something corrupt about it. But it can narrow the political appeal you make. It can narrow itself so that you say "who cares who lives in Woking?" Or "let's not look too much at the core Labour vote" because they've not been identified as the swing voters. The danger is of a narrow appeal.

The exciting news is that Gordon Brown has clearly set out to avoid this narrowing of appeal. He is trying to construct a much broader definition of Labour politics, both from the makeup of the government itself, to the policy issues he's highlighting. In the past we've seen the super marginal strategy narrow the political appeal that the Party is trying to make. There is some evidence that all the other political parties are after the same two thousand people in each of the key marginal seats, so they do begin to sound rather the same. We all employ pretty much the same type of people to get the same people to come to focus groups to get the same messages. So that narrows our ability to construct a Labour progressive majority in the way we want. In addition, if we lose representation we just don't have the people on the ground in the councils to implement things. So for both of those reasons having an electoral system that challenges us to broaden our appeal to a wider range of progressive voters, to do it in more places and which gives us a better chance of representation is obviously the right thing to do.

My own view is that our politics are such that we ought to be able to win support in most places in the country. The mathematics of going from where you are to where you want to be maybe make it look impossible, but if you look at what Labour stands for and the interest that we represent, it is possible. There are few places I could go to in this country and not put my hand on my heart and say there are more people who have an interest in Labour winning than there are people who've got an interest in other people winning.

Politically, confidence that there are very few places where there aren't more people with an interest in Labour being in power than any other party is essential to our success whatever electoral system we have. But the consequences of the way we currently run the electoral system requires us to

take resources away from places where we could be building up a base in the long term to places that we have to win in the short term.

We need to have a serious debate about where we want to be in ten years time. The argument made by many opponents of electoral reform is pretty much the argument they might have made 20 years ago. The problem is that arguments in favour of electoral reform are also pretty much unchanged from the ones we made 20 years ago. In that period of time there have been major constitutional changes in this country. We have devolved administrations with electoral reform. We have electoral reform in local government in Scotland. It is much more likely, though by no means certain, that we will have a House of Lords wholly or largely elected and almost certainly on a proportional representation basis, probably on a regional and national basis. None of these things are certain but that seems quite a likely outcome.

If we drop into most discussions of electoral reform, the debate hasn't changed in 20 years, which suggests that the Electoral Reform debate has become an English Electoral Reform debate because things have changed elsewhere. Electoral reform hasn't been thought through widely enough. In reality if we think we have a good chance of getting an elected House of Lords with a PR basis, then probably the best attainable voting system for Westminster is likely to be Alternative Vote which does provide a constituency link. It is not a proportional system, and of course there are proportional systems with constituency members, large numbers of them which are attainable. The most likely constitutional deal that we can achieve over the next ten years would be that form of electoral representation.

The possibilities are quite intriguing. You could, for example, go some way to resolve the so called 'English question' by allowing elected House of Lords' English members to scrutinise English legislation. It gets round the problem of what the Conservatives are pushing, a sort of "in out" arrangement that makes "English MPs on English laws" unworkable. You would build in a pluralist system of representation in Westminster, both in the Commons and in the Lords. And you would go some considerable way, though not as far as proportional representation systems, in making it worth fighting for votes in a very considerable number of constituencies. Given that we would have to fight for votes everywhere for an elected House of Lords, there would be a much stronger basis for constructing a Labour Party that operated effectively in every part of the country.

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This would also mean that we would avoid the problem of simply focusing on a few key voters in the main marginal constituencies because it would at least be a system where votes, first or second preferences, counted. We cannot carry on the same argument about what we want about the Westminster parliament without fully reflecting the way in which the political environment around us is changing. My suggestion is that if we got a wholly or largely elected Lords on a PR basis, on a regional basis, then probably an Alternative Vote system for the Commons, with all its imperfections that I understand quite well, would actually begin to give us the basis for rebuilding the broader Party organisation and appeal.

My thinking is very much coloured by my sense of what seems to be possible in reform of the House of Lords. If the Lords fundamentally becomes democratic, the debate about representation for the Westminster parliament has to change. The underlying votes in many seats would be different under AV. The present system encourages tactical voting suppressing third party votes and choices, including Labour voting. So we would actually have a much broader range of seats in which we were trying to influence first or second preferences. We would want the largest possible influence we could in a revising second chamber so we would have two reasons for fighting every seat. The Lords votes and the Westminster vote, not just the Westminster election, could together be part of Reversing Labour Retreat.

My view on the way forward is two fold. We should put pressure on the Party, in addition to Lords Reform, to campaign and mobilise Party members to ask for a commitment to electoral reform to be included in our Manifesto. Whether it is a writing campaign or an e-petition, we want to see something clearly about electoral reform. I wouldn't pin it down to a particular voting system. Everyone laughs at electoral reformers only ever talking about specific voting systems. A commitment to doing something about electoral reform in the Manifesto is what I would really mobilise around now. We should see electoral reform as part of the constitutional package, focusing not on this parliament but on the next parliament. We should persuade our party to address both issues, in a balanced way in the constitution. That is the way in which to try and move forward.

LCER's unique contribution to electoral reform is to relate the arguments to the politics and interests of the Labour Party. Following this path would also give us the basis for arguing for a proportional system in local government. It

seems to me something that we need to raise much more systematically than we have done in the past. Many of us are now in any case living with hung councils thrown up by the current system, and so in many ways the logic of pushing for a better electoral system of local government ought to be easier. The challenge for electoral reformers is to accept that the deal that may be achievable in the next ten years is close enough to what we want to make it worth going for.

E-petition available on www.electoralreform.org.uk

We, Labour members or supporters, believe that the time is now for Labour to demonstrate its commitment to democracy and fulfil its promise to open up debate on the voting system, and, after discussion within the Party, to state its views in its next general election manifesto.

Voters are being denied a debate, let alone an actual say, into what they want from politics and what type of electoral system and other reforms are most appropriate for that.

Our current electoral system accentuates the geographic and social divisions within the nation, and leaves many people without a proper choice over who to vote for, or a meaningful contest to care about. Making votes count should be a first step on that process of re-engagement. But it is also a step towards re-building truly national political parties, incentivised to campaign and reinvigorate their activist base across a much broader swathe of the country.

Make Votes Count is the cross-party campaign for a more representative voting system; based on the principles of a modern democracy, greater voter choice, fairness and better government. MVC has over ten thousand individual supporters. To register your support for the campaign, sign up online at:

www.makemyvotecount.org.uk.



Is Labour Working for Woking?

Lewis Baston

Lewis Baston is ERS Director of Research and author of the ERS analysis of the local elections (2006).

Philip Gould's book *The Unfinished Revolution* (1998), an exposition of New Labour's electoral strategy, is one of the key political texts of recent times. In its introduction, Gould writes:

I know the suburban sprawl I came from was an ordinary place full of ordinary people. But it was my place, and they were my people. I come from the land that Labour forgot: it moved, over almost a century, from representing the people, to ignoring the people, to betraying the people, until finally it became the people's party again.

Gould's commitment to changing the Labour Party stemmed from his justified anger at its betrayal of the ordinary people of places like his home town of Woking as it retreated into the political wilderness in the 1970s and 1980s. One of the attractive and ambitious features of New Labour was its idea of appealing beyond Labour's comfort zone and winning new sections of the electorate for the party. Its creators were astonished by how successful this proved in 1997.

But since then Labour has retreated electorally from millions of ordinary decent people in its heartlands, and in areas such as Woking. Labour sustained representation on the council in Woking throughout the dark days of the late 1970s and early 1980s, winning at least a ward each year and standing candidates everywhere. In 2007 Labour representation was wiped off Woking Borough Council. Labour left three of the 12 wards uncontested, came fourth in four wards behind UKIP, third in another four wards and second in only one. The same story is repeated in other southern towns and suburbs.

For a while, the very extent of Labour's landslide wins made for broader competition. The Conservatives, at least on paper, had to challenge in enough seats to aspire to a majority government, around 160 seats, 130 or so of them Labour-held. Labour, unlike in 1945-50, did not write off swathes of the unexpected marginals it was defending and tried – successfully in two cases – to make even more gains in 2001. With Labour's forward position in Dorset South, and the Conservatives making some sort of effort in seats like Halifax and Dover, there was a large Conservative v Labour battlefront of towards 140 seats. What was given up in 2001 was the habit of Labour voting solidarity in

the heartland areas. In 2005 Labour's loss of support, primarily to Lib Dems and others and to abstention, resulted in many of the unexpected gains of 1997 reverting to the Conservatives.

It is unlikely that Labour's electoral ambitions will be quite so broad again; the chances of a serious bid to take back many of the seats lost in 2005 are not great, barring the occasional special case. Nobody expects Peterborough, Putney, Welwyn Hatfield, The Wrekin or Forest of Dean to have lavish resources devoted to them. Labour has effectively retreated from tracts of Britain it has occupied very recently. The logic of the system dictates that Labour's priority is to defend its majority, and every pound of scarce central resources devoted to a long shot is a pound that imperilled marginals like the Swindon seats or Tamworth cannot have. With Labour's smaller majority, and the same Tory ambition as before for a majority of their own, the number of Labour v Conservative marginals in contention falls to perhaps 90 or 100. The 2005 election, when 800,000 voters were the essential audience for the national campaign, may seem like a great democratic national debate in comparison with the next election.

The boundary changes affect the matter to some degree, cutting Labour's notional majority down to 48 from 66. There is only one currently held Labour seat, which is sufficiently worsened that the Party has essentially thrown in the towel already, and that is Selby in Yorkshire where John Grogan, a candidate who has an impressive record of campaigning, stands down. It is unlikely that the successor Selby and Ainsty seat will be given priority status. Some losses in 2005, like the Essex seats of Braintree and Harwich, are wrecked by boundary changes and we are unlikely to see Labour take these areas seriously again. Others which should be winnable like Bristol West, also seem to be dropping off the priority list.

In several other areas, less severe changes have nudged a number of MPs (including those already considering retirement) towards standing down including Bristol North West, Medway and Birmingham Selly Oak. Several other marginal seats will lose their personal vote as some MPs retire, including Nuneaton, Calder Valley, Brighton Kemptown, Stroud (from where David Drew has often usefully reminded Labour of the importance of rural issues) and Burton. However, in these cases the Labour Party can be expected to mount a vigorous defence, and presumably also in some Labour seats endangered by boundary changes such as Wansdyke (now to be called North East Somerset)

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and the cluster of north Kent marginals.

There should also be concern about the need to make sure that Labour's notional gains in the boundary changes do in fact become reality. For example, in Rugby and Northampton South where seats the Conservatives won in 2005 should revert back, but without the resources of incumbency Labour might find this difficult. And there are entirely new seats which lie in the sort of territory Labour would have aimed for in 1997, such as Filton and Bradley Stoke and York Outer.

One cannot rationally dispute the logic that leads Labour to adopt the targeting strategy under First Past the Post. Resources are limited and need to be deployed to achieve the objective of winning another majority. Developing Labour's vote in the heartlands, and maintaining a presence in Conservative areas, of the sort that was the seed from which many constituency triumphs of 1997 grew, are secondary.

However, this strategic need stultifies the Labour Party. Labour's traditional heartlands, the poor, those dispossessed by change, need a voice in the political system which is being systematically drowned out by the need to focus on the marginal seats. The language of politics needs to be calibrated to fit in with the strategic priorities of appealing to potential floaters in the marginals, which is why it is no surprise that the parties often sound alike even if their hearts are in different places. And by fighting on a narrower and narrower front, Labour has moved once again from representing the people – broadly defined – to ignoring millions of them because they live in suburban Surrey or inner city Manchester. The electoral system is failing the Labour Party in its traditional mission of building an equal society, and the modernisers' mission of building a genuine people's party with broad and deep electoral support.

"Now the only way we're going to build up membership is actually to have some means where you can get people to vote Labour and with their Labour view of life, what they want to see is actual representation. First Past the Post systems do not do that."

Councillor Mike Roberts (Aldershot)

It's time for a fresh start



"I believe that Britain needs a new type of politics which embraces everyone in this nation, not just a select few. A politics built on consensus, not division. A politics built on engaging with people, not excluding them."

GORDON BROWN

The Electoral Reform Society shares these values. But we believe that a new type of politics will not be achieved under our present voting system. As the parties are encouraged to pursue the small number of decisive votes in marginal constituencies, those in safe seats – the majority of voters – are effectively excluded before any election takes place. A system which often hands out power exclusively to a single party, despite the much more evenly split way in which we actually cast our votes, tends to exaggerate division, leading to confrontation and tribalism.

We agree that it is time to deliver a fresh start for democracy. This is why we call for a fair voting system that allows politicians to better represent us and help them to tackle the serious issues facing our society. Fairness, accountability and a real choice for voters should not be compromised.

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Moving from Safe to Safe Avoiding Target

Anne Campbell

Anne Campbell is a former MP and Chair of LCER. Despite living in a Lib Dem / Labour seat, she shows the effects of First Past the Post on Cambridge, won from third place in 1992 and how her experience has reinforced her view that the voting system needs change.

We need to start by looking at history and how the Labour Party managed to develop a really rather successful election winning strategy under First Past the Post (FPTP). This may have been the reason why the past Labour leadership has been very keen not to change the strategy. Labour thought it knew how to win elections, and was quite good at winning elections under FPTP. Changing the ground rules would mean a completely different strategy, which has not yet been worked out. So that is one way in which the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform can contribute to this exercise. Rather than saying it's good for democracy, we might say, in some aspects it would make campaigning easier or there are other knock-on effects.

I'm a statistician, so I thought I might go back to some statistics. In 1992, which was the year I was elected, Labour won 271 seats in the general election. The Conservatives were re-elected, you remember, that year with a majority of only 21 in the House of Commons. So after that huge shock of not winning a majority in 1992, a lot of planning obviously went on in the five years up to 1997. And in 1997 Labour calculated that it needed to retain the seats it had and to win a further 60 seats in order to form a majority, not difficult arithmetic. So on the basis of majorities, 60 marginal seats were identified as target seats. And Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) and candidates were given fairly ambitious targets as to the number of voter contacts, the number of newsletters they sent out and so on. I remember all that very clearly. The purpose of the initial call was to identify voting intentions, and if Labour, the voter was asked to sign up for a postal vote, display a poster, deliver leaflets and join the party.

So all that went on in what we would now call the 'super marginals', 60 super marginals. More importantly, all Labour Party members and candidates who were not in these 60 marginals were asked to go and help in nearby target constituencies. So with my slender majority of 580, again in 1992, I was shipped out at least ten days out of the campaign to target seats in the rest of the Eastern region. I went all over the place and took great crowds of people with

me from the Cambridge constituency. We campaigned in Norwich North, in Luton, in Bedford and in Essex. Fortunately, I'm glad to say my result was unaffected and the majority went up somewhat, despite my frequent absence during the election campaign. Labour's always regarded this as being a huge success. We did all this work and we won a fantastic majority. Wasn't it great? But if the strategy had really been successful, what we would have gained is 60 or thereabouts additional seats at the general election and wouldn't have won any more. Because it would have meant that the work that we were doing in those 60 seats was highly effective.

What happened is that we won an additional 145 seats. The message that gives to me is, well it was all probably a bit of a waste of time. Because of the general swing, it wasn't necessary to do all that work and all that frenetic activity, because these extra seats, an extra 85 seats, where they'd been told to go and help their neighbouring super marginal – whether they did or not is another matter – also won. So you know, really the picture that it paints is something that was largely ineffective. It meant that 60 constituencies were canvassed to the point of exhaustion, and 590 had minimal activity or were ignored. Instead of doing a realistic assessment of the success or failure of the strategy, the Labour leadership assumed that it had been fantastically successful, because they'd won. The assessments seem to have been applied at the level, *'we did all this work, we won the election, therefore it works and we'll do it again.'*

I'm not saying canvassing at that level isn't successful. I've got evidence in my own constituency that it is effective. So in 2001 the target seats became those we'd won in 1997, and this time there is more evidence that it works. We didn't really target or pick up any extra seats except Dorset South. We finished up with 412 seats, only six fewer than in 1997. The interesting thing is about the turnout. Because if there was all that extra activity going on, you would have expected that the turnout would go up. In 1992, the turnout was 77.7%; in 1997, it fell to 71.5% and 2001, to 59%. So all this frenetic activity in a few super marginals might have pushed up the turnout in those seats but actually it must then have fallen dramatically elsewhere.

It seems to me quite an interesting aspect of what democracy is about? Because there were far more seats that were ignored than seats that were given this very high profile attention, one would have expected that the overall effect would be for turnout to fall, which is in fact what happened. This is difficult to tell without looking at the turnout in each individual constituency.

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From my own research in Cambridge calling on or telephoning Labour voters in the three weeks or so before election day means that they are between 15 and 30% more likely to turn out and vote.

In one very marginal Cambridge ward, we know that if we can call on our Labour voters, the chances of them turning out in local elections goes up from 30% to 60%, actually doubling the probability that they turn out and vote. When I used to contact them personally on the phone, it went up to 75%. So it does make quite a dramatic effect. This is in local council elections, not in general elections where the effect is much less marked. But the effect on Labour Party membership of targeting the super marginals has been quite devastating. I know there are lots of reasons why people resign their Labour Party membership, so we cannot put it down entirely to campaigning strategy, but in active well supported constituencies, members are much more likely to feel valued and useful and much more likely to remain members. A lot of people resigned their membership in constituencies that were not supported. The thesis needs to be tested but the anecdotal evidence is there of the effects of the strategy of targeting and Labour's retreat into its marginal seats.

Following the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which I voted against, disaffection accelerated. In the first few months of 2003, I received over 4,000 letters and emails from constituents who were unhappy about the Labour government's approach to the Iraq crisis. I remember going along to the Chief Whip and discussing this with her. I said, *'look, I've had all these letters and emails.'* She said, *'how many?'* I said, *'4,000.'* She said, *'oh, I've had 12.'* She clearly had no idea that any single issue like that could have a major effect.

My own majority at that stage was about 8,300 which sounds fairly safe on the basis of those crude figures. Cambridge wasn't chosen as a target seat in 2005, and by that stage the strategy had become refined even further, so it wasn't just confined to campaigning in the constituency, it was confined to campaigning in Parliament as well. So anybody who wasn't on the target list found it, both extremely difficult to get time off to go and campaign in the constituency and difficult to get any sort of profile in Parliament, because that was being reserved for the people who were on the target list.

Labour members in Cambridge responded magnificently to the threat. Over 400 of them turned out during the election period, to stuff envelopes, deliver leaflets, telephone and call on voters. So possibly one could argue that not being a target seat didn't make all that much difference. And in fact the swing against

us was a massive 15%. So nothing that we could have done there would have made much difference.

More than most people I see the problems associated with the difficulty of concentrating on a very, very few marginal seats to the exclusion of everybody else, and the devastating impact that that can have. We didn't manage to convince the regional office that we were in difficulty until ten days before the election, when we showed them our canvassing returns, and at that stage they started to send Ministers to Cambridge. It was just too late by that stage.

First Past the Post encouraged an election strategy which ignores 90% of the electorate, who therefore feel disenfranchised, undervalued, and are far less likely to vote. The effect of this in the longer term is bad for the Labour Party, as it leads to declining membership and demoralised members. It's also bad for democracy, as it leads to declining turnout in some constituencies and voter fatigue in others.

Labour, the party of equality, is blatantly discriminating against some of its members by giving them less support and encouragement than others. This is not an insignificant argument. Cambridge Labour Party had 1400 members prior to the 1997 election. We are now down to about 600 and this seems to be fairly stable.

In 2006, Cambridge City Council had 13 Labour councillors and 29 Lib Dems and no Tories. The County Council is down to 4 Labour councillors out of 74. The County Council is Conservative controlled despite not having a single councillor in the Cambridge constituency. The Lib Dems won power from Labour in the Cambridge City Council election in 2000. When Cambridge was lost with a majority of nearly 5000 against us, we were initially told that we could not be a target seat as the majority against us was too great. Despite this we have worked hard on the regional organiser and he has agreed to make Cambridge a priority. So we were the first Constituency Labour Party in the country to select our candidate, I believe. Daniel Zeichner was selected in October 2006. There have been no additional resources however, and we are being asked to fund the campaign mainly out of our own resources. The 20% funding of our organiser does still apply for which we are very grateful.

Cambridge has an active Labour Party which puts out regular leaflets, three or four times a year, though mostly in the more winnable wards. They have Labour candidates in every ward in local elections and fund a full-time paid organiser, one day a week, paid by the national Party. The rest of the money is

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raised locally by letting offices in the Constituency owned building and fund-raising such as Bingo, jumble sales and donations by generous Party members.

In the local elections in Cambridge, one third of the council was up for election, plus one by-election, 15 seats in all.

	Labour	Lib Dem	Con	Green	Others
% share of vote	27	33	25	13	2
seats won	5	10	-	-	-

How can one party get one third of the votes and two thirds of the seats? It is bizarre. How can another get one quarter of the votes and no representation at all?

The under representation of Labour voters in the south is clear. The real problem is the peculiar bias produced by First Past the Post which means that when Labour forms a small majority government, our MPs are mainly northern, Scottish and Welsh. When the Tories form a small majority government their MPs are mainly from the south. So we tend to get swings in policy favouring the north when we are in power and the south when the Tories are. Not the way to run the country!

"How can one party get one third of the votes and two thirds of the seats? It is bizarre. How can another get one quarter of the votes and no representation at all?"

Local Government and Labour Retreat

Jo Dungey

*Jo Dungey is a Labour Party member in Dulwich and West Norwood CLP. Her pamphlet *Democracy Day*, on the need for electoral reform in local government is available from the Local Government Information Unit website: www.lgiu.gov.uk. She is a Senior Policy Consultant at the Local Government Association but writes here in a personal capacity.*

In local government in England, Labour is now in its weakest position for many years. At the heart of this is the Party's retreat, not simply from particular parts of the country, but from a clear, albeit modernised, agenda for Labour in local government.

In my pamphlet *Democracy Day*, I argue for the introduction of a Single Transferable Vote (STV) system for local government in England. This would follow the example of the Scottish Parliament, which introduced legislation to bring the Single Transferable Vote system for Scottish councils, first used for local elections in May 2007. Arguments to bring this change to English councils include:

- It would be fairer: the council exists as a representative assembly and should do so in a way which reflects the votes of its citizens, and this could contribute to increasing trust in local democracy.
- STV would encourage local election activity and hence turnout: parties have a need to maximise their vote throughout the area, unlike First Past the Post which encourages focus on marginal wards.
- It would change and invigorate the membership of councils, providing fair representation of smaller parties and encouraging parties to put forward a diverse slate of candidates.
- It would impact on the balance of control of councils, encouraging policies with a broad base of support.
- It would strengthen the role of the whole council, encourage vigorous scrutiny, and balance new leadership arrangements.

The Conservatives are now the biggest party in local government in England. Local elections in 312 councils in May 2007 resulted in Conservatives gaining 5315 seats, Liberal Democrats 2171, Labour 1877 and others 1112. Labour administrations in local government are confined to urban areas in the north. In 2005 and 2006, Labour lost votes to non-Conservative alternatives; in 2007 the Conservatives revived. Labour has lost control of major urban councils such as

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Newcastle, Birmingham, Leeds, Coventry, and London Boroughs such as Camden, Hammersmith and Fulham, Ealing, and Southwark. There is now only one Labour controlled council in the south, outside London: Reading. Foreign policy, in particular Iraq, has clearly lost many votes, and many activists. However, housing policy, particularly stock transfer has contributed to the erosion of Labour's core vote in a way which is insufficiently recognised by metropolitan analysts.

For New Labour in the 1990s, Labour in local government was part of the problem. In order to win general elections after so many years of defeat, New Labour put great emphasis on national campaigning, media and centralised communication. New Labour was a 'brand' whose image was controlled ruthlessly by a restricted leadership group.

Local government was seen as a liability by New Labour: a focus of both traditional 'Old Labour' working class heartlands and the supposed 'loony left' of the 1980s. Particularly troubled inner London Boroughs were seen as typical of local government. Tony Blair and key associates such as Charlie Faulkner were in the Labour Party in Hackney in the 1980s, when the Borough was at the height of its problems. Michael Barber, later the head of Number Ten's Delivery Unit, was a Hackney councillor at this time. Labour local government, like the Party's activist membership, was seen as a liability rather than a base.

It must be acknowledged that there were problems to be tackled, but we have been left with no real sense of a 'Labour agenda' in local government, because of the strength of central direction. And the party leadership has become over dependent on the centralising, managerial policies put forward by civil servants, through legislation, funding mechanisms, targets, and intervention.

The decline of local activism in the Labour Party has undermined campaigning, and made it harder to get candidates for local government. There is now real concern in local government that a new generation of councillors is not coming forward – the average age of councillors now is 58.

One of the arguments which is put against proportional representation is that it will provide a route to election of extremist parties. On the contrary, the lack of political activity and low turnout in supposed Labour heartlands now provides an open terrain for the BNP, in areas such as Barking and Dagenham. The government's national policies, attuned to the voters of middle England, neglect the interests of working class voters, and extremist parties exploit this.

The arrival of Gordon Brown as Prime Minister has revived the debate about the constitution. The recent Green Paper on constitutional reform offers opportunities to strengthen the position of local government.

A proportional voting system would provide new opportunities to gain Labour representation outside traditional areas of strong support. But any voting system only provides an opportunity for parties to engage and seek votes, it does not ensure they will be won. At the core of any Labour revival in local government, is the need for a new sense of purpose and definition of what Labour stands for locally as well as nationally.

Developing a new agenda for Labour in local government is an urgent task, which provides an antidote to the passivity in which party members now appear trapped. Identifying actions councils can implement locally, moves Labour debates beyond the rather sterile concerns with party structures and the sacred status of the annual conference. New challenges around sustainability, community cohesion, transport, housing, strengthening local economies, tackling inequalities, can develop into action now. Dialogue on local needs and solutions, must extend wider than party members, engaging new constituencies. A reformed election system is one element which can underpin political renewal.

". . . the elected councillors usually got in with 10-15% of the electorate voting for them . . . (I) knew that the 3% vote Labour usually got did not represent the true level of Labour support. It simply reflected those who could be bothered to vote . . . "

Paul French (Exeter and Central Devon CLPs)

Campaigning in Proportional Elections **Mary Honeyball MEP**

Mary Honeyball is one of Labour's London MEPs.

When the decision was made prior to the 1999 European Parliamentary Elections to use a proportional system for this vote, there was an adverse reaction to the loss of individual constituency MEPs. In some ways this proved to be the correct analysis in that there was a massive reduction in the number of Labour MEPs returned. Although we are obviously not in the business of losing Labour elected representatives, I believe the change to Proportional Representation (PR) was right, not least because every other European country chooses their MEPs as well as their MPs by some form of proportional system.

There are, however, much more positive reasons for supporting PR. In my own region of London, there are several constituencies which do not have Labour MPs and probably never will. In a PR election, Labour voters in such areas do at least have a Labour representative. In my experience, many such Labour supporters are often very grateful to have their own representative, even though he or she may not be a Westminster MP.

In European elections we are able to encourage candidates, wherever they are on the list, to work with constituency parties who do not receive this attention in general elections. The same logic also works in borough elections and, of course, for candidates for the Greater London Assembly list places. It is this PR list which ultimately determines the result. We therefore need to concentrate on the PR element to maximise our vote, and as a spin off improve the turnout. In PR systems, we obviously gain seats according to our vote. This may seem logical but time and time again we see the Labour vote jump up from third to second or first place in areas we usually ignore as unwinnable, suggesting that our vote is there but voting tactically.

Despite the conventional wisdom that our vote should increase in our safe or majority areas, this is very often not the case as our voters in many instances are convinced that their vote does not count because the result is inevitable. PR systems do, in fact, refresh the places that we tend to ignore in general elections. In a proportional election all Labour votes count the same whether cast in our safest seat, our marginal targets or in places we leave it to Tories, Lib Dems, Green and UKIP to slug it out.

All this is in marked contrast to what happens under First Past the Post. Thanks to, amongst other things, sophisticated computer software, we can

home in on those relatively few individuals and areas who will determine the result. This has very real and very obvious problems. It is my strongly held view that one of the main reasons the British public is becoming alienated from politics is the fact that out of the total electorate only a small percentage is targeted in elections. The United States provides a good example of what can happen when this approach is taken to its logical conclusion. When less than 50% vote for the winning candidate in presidential elections, there is a very real problem.

As far as the Labour Party and getting out the Labour vote is concerned, I am certain that we underestimate both our support in traditional Labour areas and equally in areas we doubt we can win. We therefore lose out on all counts: we neither maximise our vote nor, more importantly, enthuse people to participate in politics. Fighting the last two European elections using a PR system has demonstrated that we cannot take anyone for granted, and that we have to work for every vote. We need to make votes count wherever they are. We need to reverse the Labour retreat so we are there on the ground everywhere. It is a good discipline.

There are no short cuts in politics and eventually the cleverly crafted and natural targeting strategy which Labour has adopted to win First Past the Post elections will need to be changed. If we do not move on we will run ourselves into the ground, losing elections and giving unwarranted majorities to other parties on a minority vote. Pragmatically we need to recognise this inevitability before we lose, for the very obvious reason that the only time to change a voting system is when one is in power.

Long term thinking about Labour's strategic interest dictates that now is the time to start being serious about campaigning in PR elections – the London Assembly elections in 2008 to increase the turnout to prevent the rise of the fascist British National Party and the European elections in 2009, to name the next two affecting London. There are, of course, also PR elections for the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament.

PR is now far from a strange foreign voting system. All of the elections held in 2007, including those in Northern Ireland, were fought under forms of voting systems where the seats allocated to parties reflect broadly the vote cast. Only English local elections used a system whereby whichever candidate topped the poll was elected and the people who voted for any other political party or individual candidate were completely disenfranchised.

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The lesson of successful political parties is not that they are in denial but that they know when something is broke and they fix it. It is now high time to have the discussion on the negative effects of our strategy for winning elections. It has been highly effective but it is unsustainable. Let us reverse the Labour retreat from more and more parts of the country. Let us maximise the turnout and our successful candidates. Let us learn the lessons of our own home grown voting systems and have the confidence to recognise that under PR we can live up to our own principles of engagement, reaching out, being alongside people wherever they live.

"Long term thinking about Labour's strategic interest dictates that now is the time to start being serious about campaigning in PR elections."

Exodus in London: a beacon for diversity or representation for the far right?

Patrick Vernon

Patrick Vernon is a Hackney Councillor, founder and director of the social enterprise company, Every Generation Media / Foundation which successfully led the campaign 100 Great Black Britons, www.100greatblackbritons.com.

The movement of Labour voters, the allure of the BNP from Hackney to Ealing and a strategy to ensure that Labour Retreat does not allow the far right to have representation on the Greater London Assembly by default are legitimate subjects to explore.

Since the first Greater London Authority elections in 2000, the British National Party (BNP) have developed a strategy of targeting white, disaffected communities. Unlike the 1970s and 1980s where the BNP could rely on a reasonable supporter base, these areas have gone through massive regeneration and gentrification with a growing Black and Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) population, and diverse faith communities.

Progressive policies from Labour authorities, the influence of the voluntary sector and BAME community organisations, activities and sharing music, food and life style, have together allowed Black, White, Asian and other communities to create the tolerant culture, ethos and lifestyle of East London.

Since the demise of Thatcherism, the rise of New Labour, the reincarnation of Ken Livingstone as Mayor and the creation of the GLA Assembly, Labour has benefited not only from the white working class vote but in places, over the last 50 years, strengthened our vote with waves of immigration from BAME communities. This was reflected in the 1997 and 2001 general elections. After a period of political instability, a Tory and Lib Dem coalition, with support from the Greens, led to the 2002 and 2006 council landslides and Jules Pipe becoming our first elected Mayor. Hackney Labour Group has now one of the biggest majorities and number of councillors in London.

This success has been based on effective planning and campaigning, targeting key marginal wards with a strong reliance on a coalition of middle class and upwardly mobile voters, with those from the African, Vietnamese, Turkish, Kurdish, and South East Asian community. We are the only council to have three elected Kurdish councillors and made history by having the first Vietnamese councillor back in 2002.

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So, in many ways, Hackney is a microcosm of London in its range of social classes, ethnicity, faith and many challenges from social deprivation and inequality. We also share some of the symptoms of Labour Retreat. We are losing our traditional white working class vote. We have not been able to engage and are losing support from first and second generation Caribbean voters and British Muslims. Now the growing black British and mixed race population, the majority of whom are under 30, represent the largest cohort of young people in the Borough and are also among the highest of those who do not vote. We are still exploring the best way of engaging with the growing number of Eastern Europeans, particularly the Polish community.

Over the last few years we have lost some of our activist base which has led to councillors doing the bulk of ward campaigning work along with running and providing political leadership of the Council. In many ways we have become a victim of our own success in focusing in winning key marginal wards.

Unlike Ealing, Harrow, Camden, Islington, Southwark, Brent, and Hammersmith and Fulham which have similar profiles and demographics to Hackney but lost control to the Lib Dems and Tories, we have worked as a team so that local people can see tangible evidence of change over the last five years, even though we started at a lower base. We have one thing in common, the BNP have no real presence or core vote. This is also the case in other Boroughs where the Tories and Lib Dems have control, such as Westminster, Kensington & Chelsea, Wandsworth, and Richmond.

We can say that the BNP has minimal impact in all 33 London Boroughs. We still recognise that we need to unite with trade unions, and people outside the Party, under the various banners and campaigns to fight the BNP and Fascism. Over the last few years there have been effective campaigns such as *Kick It Out*, *Unite against Fascism*, *Love Music Hate Racism*, *Respect* music festivals, and *Hope Not Hate*. They have played an important role, their key motivation being to prevent the legitimacy of access to political office to the Council or on to the London Assembly.

Despite all the publicity given to the election of 12 BNP councillors to Barking & Dagenham Council in 2006, the GLA has to be the biggest prize for the BNP. The BNP has successfully targeted areas where it has been successful under First Past the Post. But on a low turnout, with the 5% threshold, their tactics will be different. They can only gain a London Assembly member if they maximise their vote outside their normal hunting grounds, throughout London.

The 5% threshold has become the defining point for anti-racists who want to prevent the BNP gaining a seat under the Additional Member System. We have seen the BNP successfully clear the hurdle of 5% in Wales although this failed to secure representation because their form of PR is less proportional.

We know that a large number of people use the possibility of far right representation to argue against all forms of PR. But under PR targeting is more difficult for the BNP. What they need is low turnout to achieve 5% with less support. The response from the mainstream parties needs to be to get their vote out and engage with young and BAME voters. This is a sensible tactic for any proportional system. But in this case it's a double whammy for Labour. First, we get more votes and therefore more seats on the Assembly. Second, they increase the activity rate among voters, theirs and other parties', across the whole of London, reducing the chance of BNP representation.

It is important that we have sustained and on going campaigns to tackle the misinformation that the BNP use to mislead voters but equally important is to get out the vote. Here we are up against Labour Retreat because Labour is geared to win target voters in marginal constituencies and often ignores Labour voters in its heartlands and in seats deemed unlikely to win.

Whether they acknowledge it or not, all anti-racist resources and campaigns are tackling the symptoms of the current First Past the Post system. The biggest threat is not engaging with the BNP but failing to engage with young people, the black community and new emerging communities from Eastern Europe. By spending our energies on the BNP to prevent them gaining a seat on the GLA and fighting key marginal wards with Tories, Lid Dems and now Respect, Greens and Christian Democrats we have not used the opportunities provided by PR to our advantage.

The targeting strategy also helps explain why there is not the confidence to field more BAME candidates in safe and increasingly marginal seats. According to Operation Black Vote, there should be over 60 BAME MPs based on the demographics profile of the total population. Even the Conservatives are standing black and Asian British men and women in safe and marginal seats. The current voting system means that white middle class men are perceived as a 'safe pair of hands'. Under PR there would be a greater focus on selecting candidates based on an equality and diversity perspective along the spectrum of candidates with the right skill mix to be a politician.

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To halt the current retreat we need to have a holistic approach to London-wide targeting, to raise the level of voter turnout and to redress the current inequality in the democratic structure. It would be a huge irony if the BNP did achieve the threshold and there was a BNP Assembly member. This would totally contradict London's successful Olympic bid based on being a tolerant and diverse city. To make this less likely, we in the Labour Party need to make a contribution to raise the total vote, raising the threshold in terms of actual votes. With all the Party geared to First Past the Post campaigning, we need to raise the issue of short and long term winners and losers under the current voting system. Otherwise, in the immortal lyrics of Bob Marley's influential album, 'Exodus', there will be a movement of our voters unless "people get ready". Let's hope that together we can ensure that the BNP will not benefit in any substantial way in the 2008 Assembly elections.

"The targeting strategy also helps explain why there is not the confidence to field more BAME candidates in safe and increasingly marginal seats."

Appendix I – Labour Retreat Questionnaire

Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform, along with Make Votes Count and the Electoral Reform Society, has been discussing Labour Retreat – the idea that, because of the voting system, not only is Labour focusing all its campaigning effort, and arguably its policies, on those floating voters in marginal constituencies, but that with successive elections, this means we are retreating from more and more areas of the country.

First we bypassed the seats that the Tories win, particularly where Lib Dems were in second place; then we bypassed our own heartland constituencies; then the seats the Lib Dems could win from the Tories; then the seats that the Lib Dems won from the Tories; and now the seats that the Lib Dems have won from us.

So we believe the First Past the Post system is harmful to Labour's long-term interests in terms of party organisation, standing candidates in every seat, winning councils and councillors and holding onto our Labour MPs. We need to reverse this vicious circle, but before we can get the Party to realise this is important we need some illustrations.

Please can you write in and let us know how things are where you live – are the national and regional Labour Parties investing in the Labour vote in your area?

- Are you encouraged to put out regular leaflets?
- Are you putting up candidates in every ward in council elections / by-election?
- Do you have a paid organiser? Even if one day a week?
- Have you selected your candidate (if you haven't a Labour MP who is standing again)?
- When is your selection due to take place?
- Did you have visits from Cabinet ministers in the run up to the May 2005 general election?

Tell us your story and let us know where you are living, the postal code and the constituency.

Party activity and determination can make a difference in some areas and in others lacklustre effort can result in losing seats which should have never been lost. But the tide is in the direction of concentrating more and more resources in fewer and fewer seats, to hold on to what is ours, and forget that we are a national party – that after the next general election Labour will be even more dependent on Scotland, Wales and northern England rather than consolidating our 1997 victory that brought in representation from southern and rural seats we hadn't won since 1966, even 1946, if ever.

Please reply to LCER on lcerinfo@yahoo.co.uk or Mary Southcott (LCER Parliamentary & Political Officer) on marysouthcott@hotmail.com.