



REVERSING LABOUR RETREAT: WINNING BACK LABOUR'S LOST VOTERS

JOHN DENHAM MP:

It is hugely encouraging that in Gordon's own approach to pushing the Labour message over the last two months, he has very clearly and very deliberately gone against the narrowing of Labour's appeal to small groups of target voters that much of this pamphlet is warning about. But I don't think that should divert us entirely away from the substance of the argument that we've developed over the last couple of years in the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform.

We took the view that we had two main areas of interest. One was that we were electoral reformers; that we were democrats, that we were not coalitionists but we were certainly pluralists in the sense that we wanted a political system, as Robin Cook did himself, that gave voice to more than one single monolithic voice. A political system that meant that no party had to claim that it had a monopoly of wisdom. So one of our interests in the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform was the same interest as other supporters of electoral reform in other political parties. But we also took the view that we had a particular interest and that was the fortunes of the Labour Party and the values that we stood for and the sort of change in society that we wanted to bring about and those were things that we needed to develop more specifically, because if we were going to win support for the idea of electoral reform in the Labour Party it needed to make sense to Labour people with Labour values over and beyond the general appeal to a more democratic system. And hence the focus on what in the pamphlet we've talked about as Labour retreat.

The first past the post electoral system has inherent tendencies to undermine our ability to deliver the sort of society that we, as Labour people, want to live in. And there's nothing automatic or mechanical about that process, but nonetheless there are elements of a first past the post system that creates real problems for our politics. The first is the one that for many Labour people a pluralist system of politics in which there is more than one voice is actually the sort of society we want to live in and think will be a better run and better managed society. Second though is that particularly after a period in government the first past the post system tends to erode your electoral support and your representation, particularly in local government outside of Westminster. And then it's not just a matter of counting heads in politics. It's a matter of saying, can we win the arguments locally that will help create a better society?

Coming from the south of England one of the things that I'm very clear about is that we are right to have promised to build three million houses. We're right to be putting affordable housing at the centre of the agenda and we're right in particular in our commitment to deliver that broadly or particularly in London, the south and the south east of England where affordability problems are greatest. But if your electoral system had delivered a situation where 50% of the councils in the south of England have no councillor, who is there to argue in those communities whether homes need to be built, who has an electoral legitimacy of the case for housing? Yet we know as a party we're going to have to do that. Secondly, there are dangers to us were the electoral system to develop further towards a weaker

representation of our party again in the south and south east of England. In the 1980s the Tory's inability to be represented at all in Wales and Scotland became a fatal weakness in the legitimacy with which they gathered in Wales and Scotland and the political consequences of that are still being worked out post devolution. Issues like that arise should Labour find itself with large populous prosperous regions in which we have very little significant representation. Those dangers are there within the system.

So I do believe that we need to keep on the agenda the desirability of an electoral system that does ensure firstly a pluralist outcome, but secondly a more even and better geographical spread of Labour representation. And thirdly, a Labour Party as a party that is seriously organised and represented in all of the communities across this country. Fourthly, an electoral system that requires us to appeal to that broad coalition of people that we basically think can, will, should share Labour values. And the further danger of the current system is that the logic of the current system is you invest your limited resources only in those places where you can immediately win. And in those places where you invest your resources you invest your time only on those voters who you think are the swing voters in your constituency and you inevitably move further and further towards a system in which your party's resources are not directed in the areas that you're not immediately like to win and your party's politics are not directed to those voters who are either clearly against you or particularly likely to support you. You can win elections on that basis. We won an election last time round with the healthy majority though with four million fewer voters for our party than we had in 1997. And undoubtedly we lost some of those people over specific issues like Iraq, but we lost others because they simply thought we had stopped talking about them. We'd left out of the script. So the case in the long term for electoral reform is that it helps us build the sort of party and build the sort of politics that can create the sort of society that we as Labour people want to live in and that's the case I think that we need to continue to make.

In the pamphlet I set out some virtual heretical ideas about what that electoral system might look like and I'm not going to labour them tonight. I'd merely say that we do need to recognise that the world has moved on. Sometimes in these electoral reform meetings I hear the same arguments for electoral reform that I would have heard twenty years ago, except since then we've had devolution in Scotland and devolution in Wales. We've had real electoral reform in those places. We have a reformed electoral system from the European parliament and the betting on House of Lords reform would be one that we wholly or largely elected and almost certainly on a proportional basis. So I would say that we can't continue to have our discussions about what the Westminster parliament might look like as though one of those other things have happened. My personal view is that though I know all the arguments against it, some form of alternative vote system would deliver much of what I've said I wanted and fit well with a reformed House of Lords.

One of the first things that Gordon did in a big statement to the House of Commons, was set underway a debate about democracy and how we are governed. Some elements of that debate or the statement to the House had greater emphasis than others. The two issues I've mentioned, House of Lords and the voting system were acknowledged but not developed in great detail. I don't think that matters. Once a debate is out there about how we are governed, then that debate should go where the people want to take it. And so I don't think as Labour people we should feel constrained about taking forward in our usual constructive way, the debate about the role that electoral reform could play in the future about the way in which we're governed. But as Labour people I think we can say to our colleagues this is not just a debate about democracy, although it is certainly that, this is a debate about what sort of society enables us to create the sort of place, the sort of country that we as Labour people want to live in.

STELLA CREASY (Involve):

The theme of tonight's meeting is about how we win back our lost voters and that very much perception that there is a growing core of people out there in Britain whose values are Labour values but actually don't feel that Labour is either a party they want to vote for or indeed be part of, and I think certainly the research bears that out. We saw at the last election that more people actually voted against a party than for a party and I think for all of us who believe that we're both democrats as well as socialists that really troubles us because you want politics to be about the positive choices that a society makes coming together about the future direction of them. That withstanding, what I want to suggest may be unpopular in this room because whilst I am personally a proponent of electoral reform I am very concerned that at the moment when we talk about how we reconnect with people, whether it is as Labour Party members or as voters, we tend to look at process issues and we tend to believe that we can find a procedural or structural resolution to some of these problems rather than recognising some of the deeper trends that I think we have to address and it goes very much to the purpose of politics and indeed the purpose of membership. So for me some form of electoral reform is a moral imperative.

I want to see a fairer democratic system because that's morally the right thing to do. I do not believe that that will bring a single person back to voting Labour or to being a member of the Labour Party - or maybe it will get a few members of the Labour Party but very few. Because when you look at what's happening in British society it's not that people are angry about politics, it's not that people are actually exercised about politics. Actually the recent political audits on engagement by the Hansard Society show us that only a minority of people had what they would term as a political conversation in the last three years. When you think about that, that includes a timeframe including a General Election. Actually what we're facing is a British public that is increasingly disengaged from politics as a process and views politics as irrelevant to how you change the world. And what we're seeing is a growth of increasingly people going into social forms of activism and increasingly consumer forms of activism. And actually what troubles me is as a progressive, is that there's a growing segregation between people who will engage in personalised individual forms of activism, be they boycotting goods and collective forms of activism. So people who will join campaigning organisations and political organisations. And I think when we're talking about how do we reconnect with voters, how do we get out there, absolutely we need a plurality of voices. I think we need to recognise and value the benefit that comes to our politics and having to debate and discuss with people who don't necessarily share our party what our views are.

But we have to understand right now that within British society there is a growing number of people who have lost faith in the capacity of politics as a whole to achieve the kind of society that they want. That calls for a very different set of solutions and a very different sort of debate for us as a party to be having - certainly I believe it does - about the purpose of politics and the purpose of membership of the party. Particularly because when we look at the kind of progressive challenges that we want to face as we will face in the next ten to twenty years, none of those are issues that we can resolve on our own and they're certainly not issues that we can resolve by structural change alone. Whether it is on climate change, whether it is on child poverty, whether it is on making people vote, it has to be about that engagement. It has to be about the debate that we have and people's understanding of the value of political engagement in their lives.

So in that sense what I'm concerned for us to do as a party is to start a parallel debate alongside looking at these processes. I call it sometimes the field of dreams approach. That we sort of believe if we build it they will come and it's the same in local government. If we get the right neighbourhood forums they'll be teaming with people because we do understand that people out there have political opinions. If like many of you like me you've been on doorsteps, you know it's not that the British public don't care, you know that they're angry about things but they don't see those issues as political. I don't think we're going to solve those by neighbourhood forums. I think it's actually about the value of all of us as political party members and political activists going out there and making the case for politics and going out there and making the case for activism, not just as a matter of legitimacy and though I'd say that goes for the issues around structural processes, but actually it's the way in which we achieve social change.

Because what worries me as a progressive is if we get this increasing segregation between people who will be part of collective forms of activism, be they political or social, and individualised forms of activism, we limit our capacity to achieve social change. All of us here clearly believe that the ballot box is an important part of achieving our kind of society. But actually individually, for example, I can choose to have private health care if I want to, I wouldn't but we could choose to do that, only collectively can we choose to socially ensure ourselves to having a national health care service. So we need people to value those forms of collective engagement if we're to achieve our aims. Winning those votes back, winning that argument with people is going to be about going back to those issues and explaining to them, debating with them, and indeed disagreeing with them on some of the outcomes, but having those forums that can allow us to do that. Now electoral reform may well provide some of those forums but actually I think it goes for all of us as party members, because if I'm honest sometimes at some of these debates we do go through the same discussions and debates and we feel that we've done our bit. We've gone and we've told those people in charge that we want you to do this and that's how we're going to affect change.

Actually, in the next ten, twenty years, if we're going to be an effective Labour movement in this country we're all going to need to be a lot more active than perhaps we have been and when we look at those figures of activism within the Labour movement they've been declining for a long time. We've got an increasing number of what people call 'chequebook members.' People who pay their subs, they might occasionally turn up to a meeting but that's about it. We need a group of people who are out there advocating not just progressive policies but also progressive politics and the idea that political debate and discussion matter and that then when people get interested in politics and when people can see the value of politics in their daily lives we can draw them into that debate about the processes and structures that are fair and build that plurality of voices that we need.

So it might be an unpopular view in this room to have, but I think it's really important that we don't look for salvation in structures and that we recognise the real challenge that we have in this society of people who just don't feel that what we do is relevant to them anymore if we're going to build the more progressive society we want. Not just about winning elections, but actually about achieving social change, because it's not just about can we get enough people to get out there and leaflet and get enough people to the ballot box on the day, it's actually about can we create a vibrant civic and civil society that believes that you can achieve more together than you do alone. Thank you.

DANIEL ZEICHNER:

I just want to bring to you a few thoughts based on my experience being a campaigner in a region which in some ways it was hard to retreat from the east of England in times now past for Labour. When I first moved to the east of England I think I found myself in a situation where the Parish Council was entirely Conservative, the District Council was entirely Conservative, there was a Conservative MP and there was a Conservative MEP. So when you ask yourself in what sense you were represented, quite frankly virtually anywhere you go you're going to find 15, 20% of people are going to have a Labour view and certainly possibility the majority are not going to be Conservative. And that as a starting point marks I would say the democratic problem.

I think it's also significant because when the prime minister came yesterday to speak to trades unions he started his comments by reflecting on how different this country is now, where you only have one percent of the population who are members of political parties, than the situation thirty, forty years ago when it was ten percent of the population and in some ways there could be a democratic legitimacy for using those party structures to make your decisions and then implement them when you're in power. But as he quite rightly points out when it is so very few people taking part it is completely different.

So just to tell you a bit about what it's been in the east of England, now I'm in the hotbed of intellectual discussion in Cambridge as a candidate and Anne rights point out in her article in the pamphlet that at the height of the angst over Iraq I think you had four thousand letters and went to see the Chief Whip who said oh, she'd had twelve. And at the same time I went to speak at a meeting at Great Yarmouth and made much the same point and I think the MP there said he'd had five and all of them were about what we should do to go out there and kick arse basically. So my point is a huge difference between different places and certainly in the east of England when I got elected as a councillor it was first of all in this very Conservative part of rural East Anglia and it was part of what was at that time described by John Prescott as 'operation toe hole.' And I rather sadly felt when I was on the council that I was kind of like the toe on the council.

But what was interesting was this was an area where Labour hadn't had representation for a very long time and there were only a handful of us, but we were so much welcomed ironically by the other parties. Because they could see that it was just a nonsense to have a situation where such a significant part of the population just did not have a voice and I suppose it struck me that even at that point in the good years – that was in '95 and we just about managed to hang on, it wasn't even by a toenail I don't think by the next time, by a few votes. In the good years you could get representation, but it was totally unsustainable and that's now fallen away again and exactly as has been outlined in the pamphlet there were now many parts of the east of England – and I'm sure it's the same in other parts of the country – where Labour Party organisation has now collapsed almost completely with constituencies barely operating and barely functioning. And yet I know and you know that those Labour voters haven't gone away out there. Some of them may have temporarily voted other ways because there just doesn't seem to be much point in voting Labour in those areas, but there are still many people who vote Labour and I've always felt, and I'm absolutely convinced about this actually, that if you go to virtually any street in any town or any village and you actually put in a campaigning organisation you'll find Labour votes. They are always there. So there's that whole swath of people who are unrepresented. But the question is what do we do? Is it just about changing electoral system? and I do rather share Stella's view that I don't get many people raising it with me directly on the doorstep, even Cambridge surprisingly enough, but when you start getting involved in a discussion with people about how we

might begin to change politics, then they do begin to look at things like the voting system. Now what are the chances of making these changes?

I have to say for those of us who have been involved in Labour's National Policy Forum over the years it's been a tricky battle quite frankly just almost to keep the issue alive sometimes and to take some tactical decisions about the best ways forward. But I suppose the lesson I learnt from that within the Party is that it is quite hard to get the party to move on many of these issues.

As John Denham has said, the real opportunity at the moment is with the second chamber. And I think that will have a huge effect because in an area like the east of England the impact of the MEPs and the changed electoral system there, for all its flaws and shortcomings and I know lots of people aren't happy with that particular approach, actually the difference it's made having a member of the European parliament in the east of England so that everybody feels they've got someone who's Labour, has been absolutely huge. It's the one thing I'd say that probably has kept party organisation alive in some places. It's a huge, huge ask of one person and we have a particularly hyperactive MEP in Richard Howarth? who just manages to get round the whole region constantly and it's a hugely difficult task, but it has made a huge difference I think to many, many people. So I think a change to the system for the second chamber, just from that point of view alone of making people feel that they've got someone they can go to who is of their political persuasion, um, would be hugely beneficial and I think that seems to me to be well within grasp.

Jo Dungey's piece in this pamphlet on local government is particularly interesting because exactly as John has said, again with the Labour Party the difficulty now is experiences from Scotland and Wales mean that colleagues, when we had this discussion actually are quite negative about quite a lot of this I suspect quite often because of the political consequences. I mean quite frankly if you say to a political party who's had power for a long time we're taking it off you, which is what we said to a lot of those people for the greater good, you can see why people find that quite a hard transition. I guess it will take a bit of time perhaps to settle down but at the moment there are still some very, very raw experiences from those places which do make the discussion quite difficult. But when you then turn it round and put it into a region like the east of England I have to say if I was thinking again about being a councillor in the east of England I think I'd have to think very, very hard about it, because unless you're in some places where you have got relatively safe seats it's a very, very precarious existence quite frankly. You certainly couldn't commit yourself to it particularly long term when you've got very little prospect of having any kind of security within that role. So there is a balance to be drawn here isn't there quite frankly? But there is a big, big plus for whole swathes of the country I would say in terms of both the democratic legitimacy and in terms of having people involved in the party who can feel it's worthwhile committing themselves long term in that way.

So I suppose the conclusion I'm coming to on all this is I think the fight for a change to the system must go on within the Labour Party. I think actually we've actually achieved quite a lot in the last ten years and there are some positive lessons that can be learned from those things, but I would say to this campaign to concentrate on at the moment are certainly the second chamber and local government. And I can assure you in Cambridge where there is particular interest in these issues I suspect there will be many, many strong debates and considerable support for the kind of policies that you are putting forward.

MURAD QURESHI AM:

I'm going to take a different take from the more philosophical one and emphasise kind of reverse in Labour's retreat from my experience in London. My first experience really has been as a councillor in permanent opposition in the City of Westminster and believe you me that's not much fun at all and the only game you do really is say the reversal of whatever they do and there's only so much of that you can do for eight years. So I was kind of very glad that I had the opportunity to stand as a Labour candidate for the Assembly on the list in 2004. But interestingly there were two things that came from that experience and this was obviously part of a devolution that the national party were spreading not only in Wales and Scotland but critically in London as well.

The two experiences were essentially one was actually the issue of the day just dominated everything. Every public platform everywhere I went in the summer of 2004. It was the Iraq issue and however much I was quite clear at the beginning of meetings about my position, which was simply this is the worse foreign policy blunder we've made since Suez crisis. Actually it was a lot worse because at least the Americans got that one right. But there was very little I could do about foreign policy in the London Assembly. It was actually bread and butter issues about public investment in transport and the police service, reducing our carbon footprint and hopefully getting future powers to make an impact. Clearly the electorate at that time really wasn't terribly focused on those things. Nevertheless it did teach me a lesson that you have to deal with the issues you get on a doorstep before you can engage with them on the issues that has brought into the political arena well as those that you're hoping to fight on.

The other experience was actually on the night. I've got to confess I was fairly confident of getting in, being number two on the list, but actually on the night when the votes were coming in there was quite a scare actually. I went into City Hall and there was a rumour going around that the British Nationalist Party had got five percent. They got enough to trigger representation in the London Assembly and the Leader of the Labour Group actually called myself and Samantha who was number three on the list in and told us it wasn't going to be our night before we went down to the count. And I remember having this horrendous journey down in the lift to hear the count officially and I said to myself, well has it all come to this, that London has gone for the BNP rather than the sods like me to represent them in the London Assembly? Anyway, mercifully when the votes were called out we were informed that the BNP had 4.8% and clearly what people had done over the night was round it up to about 5%. It's understandable if you're doing it arithmetically. But that highlighted how close they actually got and this is one of the disadvantages of devolution and PR systems clearly, but there are ways of dealing with that which I'll suggest later, that smaller parties will invariably get better representation and it's not just us in the left in isolation in places like the City of Westminster but actually a whole spectrum of parties both left and right.

The other thing is the issue basis of politics. I think a number of speakers already have touched on housing and actually it's the one issue that certainly activates a lot of our party members. I can remember clearly in 2000 when the GLA Bill was first being proposed when Nick Rainsford came along to the biennial London Labour Party meetings and there was quite a strong outcry for housing responsibilities to be given to the GLA functional groups and structures, but wasn't incorporated. But lo and below at the GLA Bill which is going through at the moment or has gone through with the proposed new powers going to the Mayor, that's one area which I think will engendered a lot of party activists to get involved in our election next May. And not only that, it's very popular on the doorstep. I think it's very

important to make that connection. I'm just sorry that it's taken us this long to get there but we're there nevertheless and I do think it will make a huge impact. I also think there's something else to be learnt in the London context. I think people don't realise how low it did get in 2004. The Labour vote went down to about 25% and if we're going to retrieve the Labour retreat actually there is a solution which is actually looking at what the Mayor of London, Ken Livingston's been doing. In all this his vote stayed very strong. It was at 37% when the London Labour Party vote was 25% so if there was a trick I think certainly in the London context it's chase the Ken vote, which is predominately progressive. It's the Greens, it's the Lib Dems all based under him, hopefully going to us and showing that we actually address their issues and concerns in a similar fashion to the way the Mayor has.

I would suggest for example a lot of the community liaison is actually a kind of legacy from the GLC days which has come over with the Mayor into the GLA where actually cultural events and what have you are very important to new communities or previous communities of new Commonwealth immigrants from south Asia and the Caribbean. I feel actually there's a lot of scope to get new voters like the new Europeans that we do find in major conurbations like London which are increasingly showing their presence, but it's actually sometimes more productive to go for these new groups and the demographics of constituencies as well as trying to hopefully maintain and bring back votes that we had often taken for granted. The Poles are one very good example I think in London where the numbers are increasingly significant. They can vote in local regional and European elections but not General Elections, and it's something which I think we should increasingly make a pitch for. Not just with cultural events and what have you, but some of their real issues. I take one that I keep picking up which is their ability to send money back to Poland, like many migrant communities they intend to do this for some while and it would be useful for the national government to respond to that and I do think we in the Assembly could at least be an advocate for some of those changes.

I come back to the BNP threat. I think actually people sometimes don't understand how some of these systems work. The margin which actually stopped the BNP getting representation on the Assembly was about 6000 votes across the whole of London which is about two or three votes in every ward. That's a very small margin and I think whilst I think a lot of the concentration with the fascist threat tends to be in their geographical strongholds, in voting systems like the London Assembly certainly, they're not going to be winning constituency, they will be getting votes from the list. And the important thing about the list is actually all the votes everywhere matter. It's not just the geographical area where they're predominately strong. In the London context it's Barking and Dagenham. And so whilst I can understand the emphasis of activity at local elections and at General Elections in those geographical strongholds, but in regional elections, certainly in London, all the votes across the whole of London matter and getting out friends and family wherever we are makes a difference, even actually if they don't vote Labour as it simply increases the threshold.

So I feel there's a number of lessons to be learnt from the London context. I do think the kind of more presidential system that we have in the regional governments of London does actually enhance involvement of voters as well as party members into the politics of London and with the next contest that is almost certainly going to be a challenge from Boris Johnson I dare say that will arouse a lot of interest for possibly the wrong reasons, that will enhance the legitimacy and hopefully push the percentage of Londoners actually voting above 40%. At the same time I think if we're going to reverse the Labour retreat in some areas I do think it's also worth thinking about going for some of the new demographic groups, whether they be ethnic or different elements of the age population as one way of dealing with what's seen by some as long term decline in certain parts of the UK.

AUDIENCE COMMENTS / QUESTIONS

Ken Ritchie (Electoral Reform Society):

I just want to remind people that in a couple of months we'll be looking at the tenth anniversary of the setting up of the Jenkins Commission set up by a Labour government required to introduce an alternative voting system ... to people in a referendum. And one of the criteria that it had to go by in making its system was broad proportionality. That was what Labour wanted. That was what Labour had promised in the 1997 election and you know most of us who are in parliament today as Labour MPs I was a Labour candidate, I fought on that manifesto myself and we haven't seen it. And it is because of that, it is because Labour made this commitment that Make Votes Count came into existence.

I absolutely agree with Daniel that sure that present Lords reform is important, we're going to do that, local government reform is also very important. I think what Stella has said about the fact that you know it's not just the voting system, there are lots of other things that we need to do too if we are ever to have the style of democracy we want. But as Make Votes Count I just feel that we've actually got to add this to the things that have been said, that Makes Votes Count and is still there to look for a fairer way of electing our MPs. John Denham is an old friend of mine and I think that what he said has always got to be listened to and taken very, very seriously. It may be at the end of the day that the only way that we can make progress is through the alternative vote, but the alternative vote would have given – certainly in 1997 it would have given a to Labour and an even more distorted system and even back in 2005 we had what, we had 35% of the votes versus 35% of the seats.

If we had the alternative vote Labour would have been in more seats. Now we can argue for the alternative vote and say yes it overcomes some of the problems that we've got in our electoral system. It gives a better, a more sophisticated ... supporters, it gives round the problems with tactical voting and we can privately say yes and it's actually a very good thing for the Labour Party. We have got to decide if we're democrats or are we not, and I think that while all the other things that we've talked about tonight are hugely important we've got to remember that one of the mean offence parts of our lack of democracy at the moment or the imperfection of our democracy lies in the way that we elect our MPs and until we change that we are not going to change things. I talked to my constituency when Labour was defeated practically right out of sight. There is no point in my campaigning in my own constituency because there was no point whatsoever. Change the system and all that begins to change.

Anne Campbell:

I think the argument that John was making and Daniel too is that actually in order to have some incentive to do that house to house work you've got to be in a seat or you've got to be in an area or you've got to be in a system where the vote actually counts and that is the real problem for us. That there are so many areas, particularly in the east of England, but also in lots of other areas too where there is not a cat in hell's chance of getting a Labour representative even if you do campaign on the local issues. And therefore in order to give people incentive to go out and campaign on those issues, knock on doors, you've really got to have a different electoral system. So it's a sort of pre-requisite really.

Fabian Breckels:

I think one of the biggest problems we've got in the current voting system is the way that it has led to the vote, the Labour vote that used to exist collapsing in various parts of the country. I was elected as a councillor in Bristol north east in May which was great, but in neighbouring Bristol west we used to have the most councillors in the most of seats. We through a variety of reasons we've gradually lost more and more seats and now seats where

there was once two Labour councillors Labour now comes fourth. There is just - you know on the first past the post there is very little chance of doing anything about that and move from fourth to first and as long as you're stuck with a system where votes don't count in large parts of the country it's going to be very, very hard to actually get people to get out and vote Labour. We've got to be thinking about this. In order to win the Labour Party in and the Labour government in we've got to think about it purely from our point of view which is fine. But in order to actually achieve change we've actually got to start - in order to get that a Labour vote back in areas where there's virtually no Labour support at all you've actually got to make sure that voting Labour leads to Labour representation. In parts of the country it does, in parts of the country it doesn't. It's in the parts of the country where it doesn't that we've got a problem and it's regaining the Labour support and the campaigning and the activity in those parts of the country, for that to happen electoral reform's essential.

Sue Sturgeon:

I chair two constituency Labour parties and we never get any help from anywhere. Every election we're asked to go and help everywhere else, so I mean what is the purpose of existence really because we're asked to go and help Gloucester and Stroud whatever, but we like campaigning in our own constituency. We like working our own constituency, we know our own patch and we will not get anyone sent us, except for an MEP, Glynn who travels the whole south west and does a brilliant job. But I feel that Gloucestershire is an example of how the electoral reform system could work in a multi constituency, because currently we've got three Conservatives, two Labour and one Lib Dem which is really a proportional break up of the country and that I think is an example of how it would actually work and we would have somebody sent to us.

Malcolm Clark:

I've been very much enjoying the discussion, but I want to know how do we continue it, because it's been much more open and pluralist and interesting than many of the other discussions I've been so far in this conference and wider, but all the opportunities are being closed down for us, particular when we gout or hopes up Brown's constitutional proposals. In fact electoral reform specifically being cut out of the Speaker's conference that is being set up, it's being cut out of any other aspects and for me that's really disappointing, not only from Make Votes Count point of view but more because we are being denied this opportunity to further these discussions. How can we change that, how do we go about doing that?

Anon:

You can make a very rigid distinction between the kind of meaty questions of political substance, content, that kind of thing and this kind of mere structural procedural processes, because the kind of processes and the structures kind of imply a certain kind of politics. They have the question of incentives that Anne was talking about. How does first past the post give any incentives to parties in different parts of the country to campaign? And we've discussed the lack of incentives in areas which is very hard for Labour, but equally in areas always Labour. I was in the City of Durham which has always been Labour. It was Labour in '83, it will always be Labour until we face a complete meltdown. So how do you go out in areas like that to campaign and make the party relevant? Because at the moment it's just not happening. We're sent out to the margins because the system means that only in a handful of marginals and only a handful of swing votes in those marginals, that is the key question on whether the election's won or lost. So until you have a system which gives you an incentive to campaign for votes in all areas, whether it's east of England or whether it's the mining villages of Durham, only if you have that kind of system, that kind of process, that structure in place which gives an incentive to campaign right across the country do you actually start to rebuild the party. There's a political content built into the system that we have as voters.

Mary Southcott:

I just wanted to say something about having been an electoral reformer for a long time and I find that I disagree with John about many things and I think the merit of having an organisation where you can disagree and talk to each other and still like each other and respect each other is what we want to create. And what we have done in the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform and Make Votes Count and in the Electoral Reform Society and I came into electoral reform from coming from areas where you just shouted out and people rolled in to vote Labour and probably don't anymore, but still get Labour MPs, to a seat where we were third and I was the candidate and seeing how different it was and everybody disappeared and people in the Labour Party didn't vote Labour. People actually that were card carrying members of the Labour Party didn't vote Labour.

And it's hugely important that we see this as cultural change and I agree totally with Daniel. He is talking about a change of the culture of human rights as the Chair of that organisation and he's on the Today programme all the time, totally relevant. It's engaging people in what people are saying about what their rights are and voting is a right. To have a representative who actually says something that you agree with is a right and we don't see our conversations replicated in parliament and that is a problem and I think Gordon Brown in giving something back to parliament and making that a debating chamber for the nation will be doing something positive. But whether he can do it when we still have these old fashioned ideas about whipping people into line and getting them to agree with things that they don't agree with and ministers who say things that they don't necessarily agree with because they know that they don't get promoted if they don't say them. That sort of culture we have to change. And the conversation that has gone on tonight is so important. We are the future because the future is not going to happen if we don't get these things right. And that's why it's not a systems argument; it's an argument about culture, participation and democracy.

PANEL RESPONSE AND CLOSING COMMENTS:

STELLA CREASY:

I was elected [as a councillor] on a 26% turnout and it's hurtful actually because you think I want to represent all the people in this ward, I want to bring them together, fighting together to change this place and it's the same at a national level. But I think we need to be careful about making a distinction between single issue campaigns like stock transfers or even at a national level with people's interest in things like Greenpeace and the role of a political party, because the role of a political party is necessarily to bring together people with shared different interests and shared ideas and find some kind of compromise on those issues. Yet it's always going to be easier to be a member of Greenpeace in a pub than it is to be a member of a political party. It's always going to be easier to talk about stock transfer in a kind of yes or no thing rather than getting into the debates around resources that it entails. We need to uphold that purpose and that role of making decisions and coming to share solutions in of itself, not just because that then validates us as a political party but because actually I fundamentally believe if we don't uphold that notion of collective activity in the future our capacity to achieve the kind of social justice that we want to see in Britain is going to be limited.

I want to see us making a case for electoral reform as a moral imperative. ... I suppose my fear is that if we get caught up in debates solely about structure, we're undermining the value of politics in itself. We're kind of saying, as you did, I'm very concerned if we think that the only reason people aren't voting Labour is because of the structures, because simply that's just not what's coming out certainly for me on the doorstep and I don't that can really stack up. When we see that 40% of people who didn't vote at the last election are members of campaigning groups, it's not that they're apathetic and it's not that they're sitting there going, if only the voting system were different I'd be out there, it's actually there's something more fundamental there that we have to acknowledge and we have to deal with, is that we have lost that capacity to engage people in a debate about progressive social change and their role in it. And so I want to see Make Votes Count as part of that debate and saying, actually, voting is about changing the world. And it doesn't just stop with the ballot box.

So I fear for the narrative that until we have the right structures in there we can't possibly talk about anything else. If we accept pluralist debate I hope we can have pluralist debate within Make Votes Count and say actually we've also been saying that votes do count in of themselves and even if we don't have the right electoral system, if we don't encourage people and inspire people that politics is about making good choices about the kind of society we want to be, then actually none of these debates will matter.

I think that's what's really important to me about this debate, is that we start asking why does it matter that people get involved in the Labour movement? I don't want to see the only force for social change in this country being the people who sit in parliament or even people who sit in local government. For me this is about us saying why do we matter as political activists? So that's why in Tewksbury it matters that you campaign, not just at election time for Labour, but as part of your community, feeding back what's happening in Tewksbury on the ground to the Labour Party so that it knows where the policy is working out across the country and it has that plurality of debates and discussions. And I fear when we only talk about structures that we lose something important in that debate which is about the value that we offer, bringing our experience, bringing our ideas, in fact bringing our energy to campaigning for Labour, not just in terms of getting the votes out, but because of making difference on the ground too.

MURAD QUERSHI:

I have one observation from my experience of working in a PR system and being listed as well. I think one of the most intriguing things that's happened in London is that we have got actually a progressive coalition between the Greens and the Reds. The Greens being the Green party and ourselves in the Labour Party, and that comes out in nuances of the nine members that the Mayor needs. And I think that actually is – there's going to be increasing merit in that and so far as it gives the progressive majority ways of working together that they don't have when they have first past the post. The only really limiting thing about that system though is the listing system that it's based on, and as you highlighted it does give more control to the party machinery.

If we're going to create the space to move forward on the reforms that I think we do need nationally, one indicator of maturity on the part of the incumbent government would be to have a proper engagement with the other parties about some of the structural issues that have been raised.

DANIEL ZEICHNER:

While I began to be seduced by the alternative vote and I have to say my mind was completely changed by a meeting that Robin did I think two or three years at Labour Party Conference where I think he made the point very, very strongly that in fact the danger is that the party machine begins to focus down onto people's second and third choices and far from actually becoming a more pluralist system you actually get even more ruthless targeting. I think if we are going to change the system we've got to change it properly. I think the reason Jenkins included that was to balance up the other half of the system. So to me that was a serious piece of work, I think at the time a lot of people felt it was the right way to go ... and for me that's what I would go back to.

I think you can only begin to change the voting systems when you have begun to move away from the very adversarial system that we have had for so long in this country, and I just think there is a real appetite for that quite frankly. The strongest response I get from voters on the doorstep in Cambridge at the moment is when I begin to play the line that Gordon's been talking about, about finding a way of getting beyond the old party politics, it really, really is something people are looking for. And in the end you can end up sounding as if it is just selling a line and if that is the way it's going to be then we're going to be found out and it won't work for us. The question is are we really committed to doing politics differently. And I think some of us are and I think some of us who try to change the way of internal politics the Labour Party have worked are really, really committed to this. So it's really taking it beyond the way we do our business within the party to how we deal with the electorate. And I think that fits the appetite, as I say that's out there for dealing with the very, very big complex issues ... and that requires a different approach to politics.

I think Gordon set a very, very high bar here it seems to me. He's almost set himself up to say we're doing to do politics differently, we're going to restore trust and we're going to go for a more pluralist approach. It's actually very tough to stick to that in my view, but I think if he's going to work that through it is going to involve thinking very, very hard about some of these system issues, about some of the issues we've been discussing tonight. And I suppose the answer I'd say to you is top make sure we keep the pressure up, because actually once one begins to think through the logic at the position that he's taking, then actually there is an inexorable logic about changing our system.