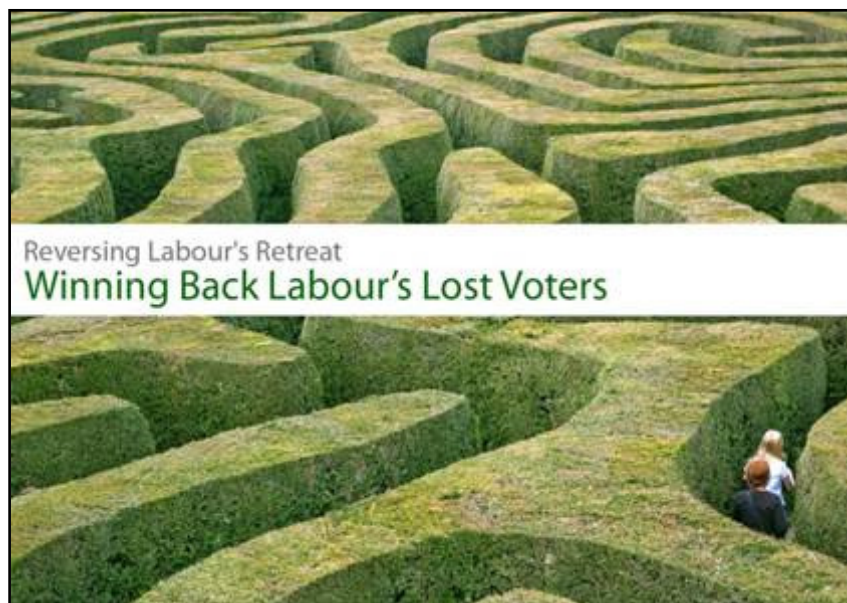


Make Votes Count Briefing for Labour Conference '07

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

Reversing Labour Retreat: winning back lost voters

Research, including that published in Labour Campaign for Reform's new pamphlet *Reversing Labour Retreat*, has shown that there are strong connections between electoral strategy and the health of the Labour Party on the ground. There is a link between the Party, the way it campaigns, its local membership and activism. Addressing the problem of Labour's lost activists and voters needs to involve recognising that link and understanding the effect the voting system has on helping determine how voters and political parties behave.



Labour seems to be focusing its campaigning effort, and arguably its policies, on floating voters in marginal constituencies. But with successive elections, this means that the Party is retreating from more and more areas of the country. Labour's claim to represent the whole country is undermined by the regions and areas where it fails to get representation. The targeting necessary to win elections under First-Past-the-Post also seems to be destroying our politics and creating unnecessary polarisation and lack of engagement. It may be cheaper to run an election in targeted marginals, but at what longer term cost to the Party or our democracy?

There is a growing debate within the Party and beyond about what measures could strengthen party activism, incentivise campaigning across a much broader swath of the country and improve political engagement. In this context, the *Reversing Labour Retreat* pamphlet makes the case for reconsidering the targeting strategy and for entering into an open discussion about changing the voting system.

Make Votes Count is campaigning to encourage public debate about what people want from politics and which democratic structures are most appropriate. Make Votes Count is calling for Labour to engage in as wide a Party and public dialogue as possible, openly evaluating all options, including electoral reform. Pragmatically and democratically, it is an issue which needs addressing. The discussion should also be linked to other constitutional and democratic changes which Labour has delivered or is still discussing delivering.

Copies of *Reversing Labour Retreat* can be downloaded from LCER's website www.electoralreform.org.uk

If you would like to explore the arguments, join in the debate or support the campaign, please get in touch or log on to www.makemyvotecount.org.uk

Campaign News

Review of Electoral Systems

The Times ran a negative story at the end of August based on a leak of the much delayed and as yet unpublished government's review of electoral systems. MVC was asked by *The Guardian* to respond to these stories and the suggestion that people were trying to bury the report once and for all. Our response – “we must have a debate on voting reform” – was published on the *Comment is Free* website. Among the key points we raised were:

“The leak should be a wake-up call to politicians who care about the health of our democracy and to the electorate as a whole to examine in whose interests the current situation really is, and who it is that deserves to be making these fundamental decisions. It cannot be right that party officials and MPs, the very people whose ‘tried and tested’ ways of working and job security would be most affected by changing the voting system, look like being the final arbiters.”

“The report won't address that most pressing of questions: whether those voting systems that are unchanged - the First-Past the-Post elections for English and Welsh local government and for the House of Commons - are still fit for purpose, and, if not, how to reform them.”

“Gordon Brown now needs to ensure that such discussions, in his party and out in the country, are not closed down but rather are integrated into the constitutional route map that he has set out. In one of his first speeches as prime minister, he called for a ‘national debate on strengthening our democracy’. How he now handles the review's publication, and whether he does indeed open up its findings to some meaningful form of a public dialogue, will be a real test of that commitment.”

- Read the full article on the MVC website.
- ‘*Britain's Experience of Electoral Systems*’, a major ERS report foreshadowing the review, is available via www.electoral-reform.org.uk

Speaker's Conference

Gordon Brown recently announced a proposal for: “*a Speaker's Conference to unite the parties in search of solutions to the disengagement of the people from the electoral process. The conference [will] consider ... electoral registration, weekend voting, and the representation of women and ethnic minorities in the House of Commons.*”

But, like with Brown's earlier proposals on constitutional reform, there is a conspicuous absence of any discussion of the voting system being included. As the Electoral Reform Society has said: “It would be absurd if the proposed Speaker's Conference was not asked to consider the outcome of the electoral systems review and ways in which better voting systems might contribute to a better form of politics.”

Preferential Voting

The Alternative Vote has been debated within Labour circles of late: by Jack Straw, some of the deputy leadership candidates, ministers such as Gareth Thomas and James Plaskitt, and now the Fabian Society General Secretary Sunder Katwala too.

While AV is not proportional, there is certainly a need to welcome all such people recognising the flaws of First-Past-the-Post and campaigning for a change in the voting system. We need to seek to engage them and try to include in their thinking a process or proper debate on proportionality. Hopefully, in the longer term, our arguments will win out and the groundwork will have been done for some form of PR.

The recent deputy leadership contest enabled people in the party to see the benefits of a preferential system and understand better how it worked. And people in Scotland also have now had a chance to rank their local council candidates in order of preference and support the range of candidates who best matched their values and policy positions. So the question becomes ever more why is the wider electorate denied that same opportunity at a general election?

Campaign News

Lords Reform

The public needs to have faith in whatever system is chosen for elections to the second chamber. The government's proposed electoral system (partially open lists) could end up being appointment by another name and goes against the prevailing mood for reform across the country. The public needs to have faith in whatever system is chosen for elections to the second chamber. There is still time for the government to start seeking the views and active involvement of the public in deciding what the voting system should be.

The challenge for electoral reformers is not just about the system finally chosen for the second chamber, but also its implications for electing MPs and further reform in general.

Make Votes Count Editorial

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. While, in opposition, parties cannot implement change.

However, we need to move beyond this narrow thinking. 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. And it also may help in re-building truly national political parties incentivised to campaign and nourish activity across a much broader swath of the country. Those outcomes are part of what MVC is campaigning for.

Join us in getting that message across – to the government, to parties, to the media, and to voters.

Close Elections Globally

Many recent elections across the western world have seen the two main parties fairly evenly split, with few votes separating them. Each of the countries involved has a different way of dealing with such hung parliament or close election situations, based on their particular circumstances and culture.

We tend to think the British system creates more stable governments than our continental neighbours. Yet the large majorities gained by both Thatcher and more recently Blair have shielded us from the reality. It is time parties here paid attention to the experiences of other countries and started thinking about how their interests – and the interests of democracy – can best be served in the event of such a situation happening here.

In Wales, and to a lesser extent Scotland, the process of coalition-building since the 3 May elections has been a new departure. Parties started looking beyond Westminster to what happens other countries, where these kind of post-election negotiations are the norm. The deliberations from all sides were subjected to an unprecedented degree of view and scrutiny from party members and also – via the media – the public. New ways of seeking consensus and cross-party co-operation have been explored – a lesson that the Westminster-based parties may want to draw on.

Whatever stance the Labour party takes, it will need to have legitimacy and consistency in the public's eyes to succeed. This would include any informal or formal offers / deals made, including on electoral reform. Citizens need to be involved in the choice of voting system. Allowing them that choice would be a strong sign that Labour is concerned about democracy and not just winning.

You can download a copy of the *Close Elections Globally* report from the 'info' section of the MVC website or request a copy by contacting us.

Taking the campaign forward

Shake up Politics



Politicians like telling us that they never hear anyone on the doorstep or in their mailbags talk about electoral reform. What they fail to realise is that people all the time are; just phrasing it in different ways or voicing many of the symptoms that First-Past-the-Post is responsible for. We need to make clear that “voting never changes anything”, “they are all the same”, “I feel ignored” and many other of the comments and concerns regularly raised are intimately connected with the reform debate.

The voting system affects the type of politics we have and the type of campaigning that takes place. As importantly, the society we live in and our expectations of the political process have moved on, but our institutions have not.

A more proportional voting system would shake up elections and make them more interesting. It would help:

- Make politicians more accountable
- Make political parties take you more seriously and compete to get your vote
- Have greater choice at the ballot box
- Make your vote really count at elections
- Modernise our democracy

Our challenge is to start getting these messages across; and to make politicians and the media see how relevant and integral our campaign is to the process of re-engagement and the constitutional reform programme now being put forward by Gordon Brown.

Promoting the campaign more widely

- organise a speaker for a party meeting
- host a debate or education session on electoral reform with a local community group or at a community event
- distribute literature on voting reform
- sign up supporters on a campaign stall
- write letters to your local newspaper
- blog or podcast for reform
- recommend our website and blog, which is updated almost daily to highlight the dynamic nature of the campaign.

Make Votes Count can offer campaign advice and supply materials to help you engage and involve others. MVC may also be able to provide a speaker or suggest possible people to ask.

‘Talking with Tatchell’ web interview

MVC’s Mary Southcott and Chris Huhne were interviewed by Peter Tatchell on the subject of electoral reform. The ‘Talking with Tatchell’ programme was broadcast 14 Sept on internet television station www.18doughtystreet.com You can view or download the programme anytime via our website or the link below. Watch it and encourage others to do so too. Or use it as a starting point for discussion.
<http://doughty.gdbtv.com/player.php?channel=205>

Have something to say ... then feel free to contribute your opinions, comments and ideas to the Make Votes Count blog:
www.makemyvotecount.org.uk/blog

Make Votes Count

The campaign for a more representative voting system

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